THE RISE AND FALL OF A FRONTIER MINING TOWN: COOKTOWN 1873-85

Robert Ormston
BA University of Queensland
MA (Strategic Studies) Australian National University

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Department of History
University of Queensland

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I certify that the work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I further declare that I have not submitted the material, either in whole or part, for a degree at this or any other university.

Robert Ormston
22 May 1996

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ABSTRACT

Cooktown today is a small, somewhat isolated town on the eastern coast of Far North Queensland. Its main functions are as the service centre for a variety of properties and settlements on Cape York Peninsula, and as a tourist gateway both to the Cape and the nearby Great Barrier Reef. But in its heyday, in the mid 1870s, Cooktown was a bustling frontier town, providing the entry point and service centre for the Palmer River goldfields. At its peak, it boasted a population of some 4,000 people and was not infrequently touted as the potential capital of Far North Queensland.

This thesis examines why Cooktown failed to live up to its expectations and why, by the mid 1880s, the town had become but a shadow of its former self. The hypothesis is that many of Cooktown's early settlers, who were typically small-scale European merchants or artisans, were attracted to the town by the prospect of making a quick fortune from the passing trade of would-be miners *en route* to the Palmer River goldfields. Once established as part of the Cooktown business community, the more successful businessmen (and there were almost no women) found that their relative prosperity brought with it a degree of social and civic respectability generally far beyond anything they could have aspired to in larger, southern towns.

Very few of the town's early key figures, though, had the entrepreneurial skills or vision to see beyond their own limited achievements or that of Cooktown as the service centre for the Palmer River goldfields. Moreover, early Cooktown's civic leaders tended to be those with the time and social pretensions to be involved, rather than those best able to represent the longer-term interests of the town. The result was that few efforts were made to diversify the town's economic base, beyond its commercial links with the Palmer. So once the Palmer slid into decline, in the late 1870s, Cooktown followed.

It is, of course, easy to be wise with the benefit of hindsight, and to be critical of individuals who were no doubt doing what they thought best at the time. It is also true that there were probably only limited diversification opportunities in the 1870s and 1880s for a small coastal settlement like Cooktown. Less easily explained is why the authorities in Brisbane seem generally to have been taken in by the hyperbole coming from 'boosters' in Cooktown, years after the town was already in decline, and why the Government continued to expend money on what proved to be ill-fated ventures, notably the railway line to Laura. The most likely explanation would seem to be that it was because of the 'tyranny of distance', combined with bureaucratic inertia.

In pursuing its central theme, the study also addresses a range of other issues relating to the early development of Cooktown. They include early European contact and subsequent relations with the Aboriginal population of the area; the physical growth of Cooktown and its business community; the sociological formation and development of the town community; the economic nexus between Cooktown and the Palmer River goldfields; and the role played by Cooktown in the wider development of Queensland during the 1870s and early 1880s. In considering such issues, the study does not pretend to provide a comprehensive account of early Cooktown. Rather, it attempts to determine the extent to which the Cooktown experience 'fits' the wider, traditional interpretations of local, regional and Queensland history. It also attempts to identify themes or trends not previously articulated, but which may have relevance beyond Cooktown.

Probably the most significant conclusion to emerge is the under-rated role of the Chinese in the early development of Cooktown. Certainly, there are numerous, popular accounts of Chinese miners flocking to the Palmer River gold-rush. But less well known is that the Chinese at times made up at least one third of the population of Cooktown. And for several critical years, Chinese merchants, shop-keepers and small-businessmen played a key role in the town's commercial life. The study concludes that around 60 per cent of the value of gold mined at the Palmer between 1873 and 1885 ended up in Chinese hands, either in Cooktown or in China itself.

More generally, the study suggests that early Cooktown was typical of many other small coastal towns, both in Queensland and elsewhere in Australia. Indeed, one of the key aims of the study has been to analyse early Cooktown in terms of experiences elsewhere, in order to enable some meaningful comparisons to be made. Moreover, through the use of quantification, the study attempts to provide some benchmarks to support such comparative analyses. Clearly, early Cooktown was only one of a number of settlements contributing to the wider development of Queensland in the 1870s and 1880s. This study hopefully enables its relative importance to be better understood within that larger context.

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PREFACE

A number of people have asked me over the past several years why I chose early Cooktown as the subject of this thesis — many presumed that I or my forebears came from the town, or that I had some recent association with it. My answer has been neither. Rather, my interest in Cooktown developed during the course of my undergraduate and post-graduate studies in Australian history at the University of Queensland, dating from 1980. One of my earliest assignments — on the broad subject of the expansion of 'civilisation' into Queensland — was on early exploration work in Cape York Peninsula. It then seemed a logical progression, in a subsequent assignment on early race relations, to contrast the experience of Ludwig Leichhardt in 1848 with that of the Jardine brothers in 1865-66 in their contact with the Aborigines of Far North Queensland. Having developed such 'expertise', on the basis of two 1500-word essays, it then seemed even more logical to continuing specialising in the Cape York region!

The other reason for choosing Cooktown is that it is one of the few towns in Queensland which has not been the subject of a detailed academic study or popular account — somewhat surprisingly given its flamboyant past and its relative proximity to the James Cook University in Townsville. One explanation could be that Cooktown today bears little resemblance, in a physical or socio-economic sense, to the bustling community of its heyday. Another is that the history of early Cooktown is typically overshadowed by the more exciting story of the Palmer River goldfields, and the associated influx of Chinese to Far North Queensland. Another is the perception in academic circles, at least, that very little primary-source material relating to Far North Queensland has survived the cumulative ravages of a tropical climate, cyclones, fires and an early bureaucracy little interested in the archival preservation of official records.

Certainly, there is little primary-source material relating to the 1870s and early 1880s to be found in Cooktown today. The one important exception is the well-preserved register of births, deaths and marriages from the period, held in the Cooktown court-house. The absdurdity — from an historian's viewpoint — is that current state legislation prohibits general access to the document, on the basis of concerns for the privacy of individuals from 120 years ago. Nevertheless, there is a considerable amount of primary-source source material still available, as discussed in more detail in the introductory chapter, notably in the Queensland State Archives and the National Library in Canberra. Indeed, one of the dilemmas in this study has been to place bounds on its scope, while maintaining a balance between detailed analysis and generalisations with broader implications at the regional and Queensland-wide level.

To that end, I wish to record the invaluable guidance and encouragement over the past six or so years of my principal supervisor, Emeritus Professor John Laverty and, more recently, that also of Associate Professor Ross Johnston, Head of the History Department at the University of Queensland. Both have been extremely supportive, especially given that I have been based in Canberra, with only periodic visits to Brisbane and the occasional trip to Townsville and Cooktown itself.

At a more personal level, I wish to thank a former colleague, Sylvia Phillips, for her assistance in typing the manuscript and formatting the various tables and graphics. I also want to thank my wife Betty and daughter Jacinda for their uncomplaining forbearance, as I cloistered myself away for evenings and weekends, while other more 'normal' families shared in typical day-to-day activities.

Robert Ormston
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CHAPTER 1 - THE STUDY OF A FRONTIER TOWN

Cooktown, in Far North Queensland, is today a small town with a population of around 1200 people. It is the most northerly of the seaport towns on Queensland's eastern coast, located 170 kilometres north of Cairns and about 1600 kilometres from Brisbane. The town attracts some of the tourists visiting Queensland's tropical north, mainly in the form of day-trippers from Cairns. It is also the gateway for vehicle-borne 'adventure safaris' into Cape York Peninsula, and cruises and underwater excursions to the adjoining Great Barrier Reef. Cooktown is also the service centre for a number of cattle stations on Cape York Peninsula, as well as the Aboriginal community at Hope Vale (fifty kilometres to the north).

Many of the town's adult residents are involved in the tourism and hospitality industries. There are, for example, four hotels in the town, several motels and other establishments offering accommodation, a handful of restaurants, a variety of shops and three or four entry-charging tourist attractions, including the impressive James Cook Historical Museum (operated by the National Trust). Of the remaining population, most are employed either by the Queensland Government or the local Cook Shire, which has its headquarters in Cooktown. As could be expected from a town in tropical North Queensland, Cooktown also has its share of retirees and semi-permanent unemployed.

Like most other non-capital city communities in Australia, Cooktown has also suffered over the years from 'urban drift', particularly to Cairns and Townsville. Indeed, those two cities, with populations of 70,000 and 90,000 respectively, are seen as the 'bright lights' for those in Cooktown aspiring to 'greener pastures'. The irony is that 120 years ago, as European civilisation first spread into North Queensland, it was Cooktown — in competition with Cairns and Townsville — that lay claim to 'the capital of the north' and potential Singapore of the South Pacific.[1]

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1 See, for example, the editorial in *The Cooktown Herald and Palmer River Advertiser (CHPRA),* 17 October 1874, p. 2 contending that 'there is no other town on the east coast with any pretensions, whatever, except Cooktown [to the mantle of capital of the north]'.

Moreover, Cooktown in the mid 1870s had the credentials to support such claims. In 1876, Cooktown's population of around 2400 was supporting a workforce on the Palmer River goldfields of some 15,000 European and Chinese miners. Its port was widely regarded as 'one of the finest in the colonies'.[2] The volume of traffic through the port in the years 1875-77 was second only to Brisbane (among Queensland ports), with Cooktown often the first Australian port of call for ships from Hong Kong and Singapore.[3]

Revenue generated from customs duties was similarly second only to Brisbane across the years 1875-77 (although Rockhampton narrowly 'pipped' Cooktown in some individual quarterly reporting periods).[4] Even more impressive was the value of gold exports shipped through Cooktown from the Palmer River goldfields during the mid 1870s. Between 1874 and 1877, some 839,000 ounces of gold, valued at nearly £3 million, passed through Cooktown.[5] That was almost 30 per cent more than the Charters Towers' fields had produced in six years and 25 per cent more than Gympie had produced in ten years.[6] In 1877 alone, the Palmer River goldfields produced 159,571 ounces of gold, representing 45 per cent of the Queensland total.[7]

Beyond the straightforward economic contribution of gold production and customs revenue was the catalytic effect that the success of Cooktown and the Palmer River goldfields had upon the overall Queensland economy in the 1870s and early 1880s.[8] Whereas the discovery of gold at

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2 See, for example, *CHPRA,* 17 October 1874, p. 2 and the assessment of a visitor from Townsville in *The Brisbane Courier,* 27 April 1874, p. 3 describing the port at the Endeavour River as 'one of the finest north of Sydney'.

3 In 1876, for example, Brisbane was visited by 333 ships, Cooktown 115 and Townsville 109: see official interchange statistics as published in *The Cooktown Courier,* 6 December 1876, p. 3.

4 Cooktown was second to Brisbane in the twelve months to July 1875 and 30 September 1877, while Rockhampton narrowly edged out Cooktown in the quarter ending 30 September 1875: see *CHPRA,* 18 August 1875, p. 2; 20 October 1875, p. 2 and 24 October 1877, p. 2.

5 From the statistics of gold production in *Votes and proceedings of the Legislative Assembly of Queensland [QVP)]* 2, 1886, p. 263.

6 Calculated from the statistics in *QVP,* 2, 1886, p. 263.

7 See the editorial in *The Cooktown Courier,* 10 August 1878, p. 2.

8 See J.R. Laverty, 'The Queensland economy 1860-1915' in D.J. Murphy (ed.), *Prelude to power: the rise of the Labor Party to power in Queensland, 1815-1915,* Jacaranda Press, Milton, 1970, p. 30.

Gympie in 1867 had rescued the ailing Queensland economy from severe recession, the discovery of alluvial gold in Far North Queensland not only climaxed public optimism within Queensland itself but triggered a wave of immigration and overseas investment, thereby setting the stage for the boom of the early 1880s.[9]

At a more philosophical level, Cooktown in the 1870s played a not insignificant role, together with other frontier mining towns, in the development of a number of attitudes and beliefs which became pre-eminent in the ethos of later generations of Queenslanders. They included the willingness of individuals to set forth into the 'unknown' in pursuit of their fortune, the ideal of being one's own boss as opposed to being employed, the somewhat ambiguous attitudes towards mateship and individualism, the attitude towards Aborigines ranging from intolerance to outright hostility, the 'keep Australia white' attitude based upon beliefs of racial superiority and fears of living standards being undermined by cheap Chinese and Melanesian labour, and cynicism regarding the willingness of the government to promote rural development in other than the pastoral industry.

Given such impressive antecedents, the obvious question is what caused Cooktown's demise? The simple answer would seem to be that Cooktown's viability was inextricably linked to the viability of the Palmer River goldfields. Once the Palmer slid into decline from about late 1877 onwards — as its alluvial deposits were worked out — Cooktown followed suit, having failed to diversify as a market outlet or processing or service centre for other industries or settlements.[10]

During its slide into decline, though, Cooktown did in fact continue to attract government funding for major public works expenditure, most notably on the ill-advised and ill-fated railway line to Laura. The reason for that continuing support would seem to be that successive governments in

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9 By the early 1880s, Queensland's popularity with British emigrants was such that the Agent General in London suspended free and assisted passages in order to accommodate persons prepared to pay their full fare: see T.A. Coghlan, *Labour and industry in Australia,* Vol. 3, Oxford University Press, London, 1918, p. 1295.

10 Cooktown's failure to diversify needs to be seen in the context of the region's exploitable economic potential, an issue addressed in Chapter 8.

Brisbane allowed the hyperbole coming from business and civic leaders in Cooktown to cloud the reality of the town's tenuous *raison d'être.*

With the benefit of hindsight, it seems that policy-makers and those controlling the purse-strings in Brisbane failed to detect the demise of the town until it was almost a *fait accompli.* Yet had Cooktown's demise been detected earlier, it might have saved much wasted expenditure. At best, it may have resulted in funding in lieu for the establishment of an industry or service — if indeed one or more could have been identified — which offered Cooktown some better prospect of surviving in the longer term.

An associated issue is why business and civic leaders in Cooktown continued to argue throughout the late 1870s and early 1880s that the town's longer-term prospects were linked to the goldfields and that the goldfields had a sustainable future. One explanation is that many of the early European settlers in Cooktown had no intention of staying for a long period but merely hoped to make their fortune before returning to the 'civilised' parts of Queensland or the southern states. A number of them, however, would have found that prosperity brought with it a degree of social respectability considerably beyond that to which they could aspire in the south. They often remained, therefore, in frontier towns like Cooktown for many years, enjoying their prosperity and providing the communal framework for ongoing urban development.

Moreover, so long as the goldfields provided the lure, the continuing throughput of 'hopefuls' would have been sufficient to ensure the commercial viability of the 'persisters'. Once the Palmer slid into decline, however, and the flow of hopefuls dried up, the persisters — many of whom were service providers — would have been in financial straits. Their recourse, short of quitting the town was to talk up the prospects of the goldfields and to agitate for the accoutrements of 'civilised society', such as paved roads, bridges, botanical gardens, railways etc, on the perceived basis that such trappings would demonstrate to would-be hopefuls the longer-term viability both of Cooktown and its hinterland. In retrospect, the better course for such 'boosters' would have been to identify and develop an alternative and long-term industry or service for the region.

Both these issues — the hyperbole coming from the town's business community and the apparent inability of successive governments to detect the imminent demise of Cooktown — are discussed later in this chapter under the heading 'An Approach to the Study'. Firstly, though, it would seem useful to examine previous research material on early Cooktown and its surrounds.

Previous Research on the Subject

Somewhat surprisingly, there has been no comprehensive account written of the history of Cooktown. The nearest has been Holthouse's *River of gold: the story of the Palmer River gold rush,* first published in 1967.[11] It provides a sensationalised (and often exaggerated) account of Cooktown in the 1870s, in the context of the town's role as the entry point and service centre for the Palmer River goldfields. Edwina Toohey's more recent *Kie daudai: notes and sketches from Cape York* includes a chapter on early Cooktown, but is written somewhat superficially and without reference sources.[12] The remaining material is a fragmentary, mosaic-like collection of primary and secondary works, ranging from the journals and reports of early white explorers to the studies published in recent years by James Cook University of North Queensland, primarily on early race relations in Far North Queensland.

The Records of Early White Explorers

The journals, diaries, reports and narratives of the early European explorers into the region might be considered by some to be source documents, rather than previous research. Most of them, however, in the literary traditions of the nineteenth century, provide more than a simple narration of progress or mundane description of the terrain or flora and fauna. Indeed, most contain a wealth of observations which usefully establish some preliminary benchmarks for such issues as the role of explorers in opening up new 'frontiers', the role of government in the spread of European civilisation, early race relations, white attitudes towards the

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11 H. Holthouse, *River of gold: the story of the Palmer River gold rush,* Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1967.

12 E. Toohey, *Kie daudai: notes and sketches from Cape York,* E. Toohey, Ravenshoe, 1994.

land and its resources, the nexus between explorers and settlers, and the effects on lines of communication imposed by distance and terrain.

The various edited versions of Captain Cook's journal, for example, provide an authoritative account of the first recorded visit by whites to the Endeavour River, from 14 June to 4 August 1770.[13] During that time, Cook was understandably pre-occupied with the repairs to his ship, which had been seriously damaged after running aground on the Great Barrier Reef. His entries for the period of his enforced stay at the Endeavour River accordingly lack the careful description of local conditions and perceptive analysis typically found elsewhere in his journals. Indeed, on several lifestyle issues in relation to the local Aboriginal inhabitants, it is evident that Cook 'got it wrong'.[14]

Fortunately, Cook's somewhat scant account is augmented by the more detailed observations of Joseph Banks. Banks obviously spent much of his forty-eight days at the Endeavour River ashore, either exploring the local countryside or venturing further afield, such as his brief expedition to Lizard Island (thirty kilometres off Cape Flattery to the north).[15] While most Australians would normally associate Banks with his botanical studies, his major contribution to the history of Far North Queensland was arguably his description and observations of the local Aborigines around the Endeavour River. Indeed, his comprehensive account of them takes up fifteen pages of Beaglehole's edited version of his journal and includes not only a rudimentary dictionary of the local dialect but some very useful observations on what was later to be recognised by anthropologists as the Aboriginal system of reciprocity.[16]

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13 See, for example, J. Hawkesworth, *An account of the voyages undertaken by order of his present Majesty for making discoveries in the Southern Hemisphere,* Vol. 4, Strahan and Cadell, London, 1783; J.C. Beaglehole (ed.), *The journals of Captain James Cook on his voyages of discovery,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1955 and A.W. Reed (ed.), *Captain Cook in Australia,* Reed, Sydney, 1969.

14 These issues, the ability of mainland Aborigines to venture offshore in outrigger canoes and their utilisation of marine resources for food, are discussed further in Chapter 3 under the heading 'The Traditional Aboriginal Lifestyle'.

15 See J.C. Beaglehole (ed.), *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks 1768-1771,* Vol. 2, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1962. His observations in relation to mainland Aborigines having also visited Lizard Island are discussed in Chapter 3 under the heading 'The Traditional Aboriginal Lifestyle'.

16 See Beaglehole, *Joseph Banks,* pp. 122-37.

In the following 100 years, very little of direct relevance to Cooktown was published, simply because no-one visited the area for any length of time. Lieutenant Phillip King, in command of HM Cutter *Mermaid,* called at the Endeavour River from 28 June to 12 July 1819 and again on his return journey on 27 July 1819. The most notable aspect of his visits was a clash with local Aborigines over the issue of reciprocity on 2 July 1819.[17] Apart from his report of that clash, his journal entries contain little other useful material.

The journals of the early land explorers into Cape York Peninsula — Ludwig Leichhardt in 1844-45, Edmund Kennedy in 1848 and the Jardine brothers in 1864-65 — similarly have little direct relevance to the Cooktown area, simply because their routes took them nowhere near the Endeavour River.[18] Their journals do, however, provide some very useful insights into a number of the more general issues mentioned beforehand (the role of explorers, the role of government, early race relations etc).

Indeed, the observations in Leichhardt's journal, in particular, establish a number of useful benchmarks on white attitudes towards the land and early race relations.[19] They also reveal, *inter alia,* how changing intellectual fashions and the influence of colonial life in Australia had quickly eroded the ideas of 'noble savagery' which were fashionable in educated circles in England at the time of Cook's visit.[20]

Of more direct relevance to Cooktown are the journals and reports of the explorers and prospectors who ventured into the south-eastern quadrant of Cape York Peninsula in the early 1870s, following the discovery of gold at the Gilbert River. They included William Hann in early 1872 (to the Annan River, south of Cooktown, and its hinterland), James Venture Mulligan in June 1873 (to the Palmer River) and G.E. Dalrymple in

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17 For an account of the incident, discussed further in Chapter 2 under the heading 'Further Maritime Visitors', see R.L. Jack, *Northmost Australia,* Vol. 1, Robertson, Melbourne, 1922, p. 149.

18 Kennedy, who came closest, passed some 120 kilometres to the west: see Map 2.2 'The Routes of Early Land Explorers Into Far North Queensland' at page 51 in Chapter 2 under the heading 'The Early Land Explorers of Far North Queensland'.

19 See L. Leichhardt, *Journal of an overland expedition in Australia,* Boone, London, 1847.

20 This issue is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3 under the heading 'Stereotyping Aborigines as Black Savages'.

September 1873 (from Cardwell by sea to the Endeavour River). All three are particularly useful for their observations on the terrain and their clashes with local Aborigines.

On the issue of terrain, for example, there are evident contradictions between the favourable reports of sea-borne explorers, like Dalrymple, who saw the land from the security of their ship and recorded exotic descriptions of the tropical jungle, against the sombre reports of those — like Hann and Mulligan — who physically confronted the leeches, tree ants, sandflies and mosquitoes, while hacking their way through the same dense, dark, sodden tropical jungle.[21]

On their clashes with local Aborigines, the common thread in all three is that racial confrontation and violence was an almost daily occurrence. Gone, it seems, was any suggestion that the two cultures could co-exist or, at least, that an encounter between Europeans and Aborigines could be resolved peacefully. Moreover, Dalrymple, in particular, seemed intent on portraying the Aborigines he encountered in pejorative, dehumanising terms, emphasising either their physical repulsiveness or their depraved, cannibalistic habits.[22] The unstated conclusion is that an escalating cycle of racial conflict was well underway in Far North Queensland even before the first white settler stepped ashore at the future site of Cooktown in October 1873.

The Reminiscences of Early White Visitors

Once the township of Cooktown was established, a number of early visitors, officials and business-men committed to paper their experiences and recollections of life on the Far North Queensland frontier. Examples include Allen's *A visit to Queensland and her goldfields;*[23] Binnie's *My life*

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21 See, for example, the lavish account of G.E. Dalrymple, 'Narrative and reports of the Queensland North-East Coast Expedition 1873', *QVP,* 2, 1874, p. 643 against the descriptions of a land explorer in J.V. Mulligan, 'Expedition in search of gold and other minerals in the Palmer districts by Mulligan and party', *QVP,* 1, 1876, pp. 3-4.

22 See, for example, Dalrymple, 'Narrative', pp. 633-4 describing the 'blood-thirsty, bullying scoundrels ... with the most ferocious expression of countenance ... [who engaged in the practice of] wholesale habitual cannibalism'.

23 See C.H. Allen, *A visit to Queensland and her goldfields,* Chapman and Hall, London, 1870.

on a tropic goldfield;[24] Palmer's *Early days in North Queensland;*[25] Corfield's *Reminiscences of Queensland 1862-1899*[26] and Hill's *Forty-five years' experiences in North Queensland.*[27]

Practically all of these contemporary accounts were written in a *Boys Own* journalistic style, usually emphasising in exaggerated and sensationalised terms the 'heroic' exploits of brave and hardy Europeans existing under great hardship and personal danger at the edges of white civilisation. Certainly, their tone was markedly different to the official reports of earlier white explorers, whose reporting style was usually one of modest understatement.

The accounts of most early visitors were also largely seen from the racist and gender-biased perspective of a white male of nineteenth-century British background. Allen, for example, while noting that 'white suits are considered the correct thing in towns', went on to advise potential British visitors that 'flannel is far more healthy in hot climates than either linen or cotton [and] ... Crimean shirts are the best wear ... in the bush, where coat and vest are rarely seen'.[28] On the subject of Aborigines, Allen echoed the prevailing view in his assessment that

> no race of savages can be imagined more hideously ugly .... [Moreover] they have the very smallest intellectual development.[29]

That is not meant to be unduly critical or dismissive of such contemporary accounts. In terms of their views on race relations, in particular, most were simply a product of their time. Moreover, behind the exaggerations and sensationalism, several of the reminiscence-style accounts provide some very useful insights into the European lifestyle in Cooktown, the routine of carriers on the Cooktown-Palmer track and the prevailing white view on race relations, both in relation to Aborigines and

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24 See J.H. Binnie, *My life on a tropic goldfield,* Penguin, Melbourne, 1944.

25 See E. Palmer, *Early days in North Queensland,* Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1983.

26 See W.H. Corfield, *Reminiscences of Queensland 1862-1899,* Frater, Brisbane, 1921.

27 See W.R.O. Hill, *Forty-five years' experiences in North Queensland,* Pole, Brisbane, 1907.

28 Allen, *A visit to Queensland,* p. 161.

29 Allen, *A visit to Queensland,* p. 181.

Chinese. Hill, in his capacity as a mining warden on the Palmer River goldfields, and Corfield, as a teamster on the Cooktown-Palmer track, also provide explanatory accounts of several otherwise hazy incidents which occurred in the Cooktown-Palmer area in the early 1870s.[30]

The Studies by Anthropologists

The first 'academic' research on early Cooktown and its surrounds was the series of studies conducted in the 1890s by the noted anthropologist Walter Edmond Roth (who in 1897 was appointed by the Government as the first Protector of Aborigines in Queensland). Operating from his base in Cooktown, Roth conducted a number of surveys of the Aboriginal groups living between the Daintree River to the south and Princess Charlotte Bay to the north.

Interestingly, however, only one of the forty-odd research papers produced by Roth related to the Aborigines of Cooktown.[31] That presumably was a reflection of the reality that the tribal groups of the Cooktown area had by the 1890s been reduced to a pitiful remnant, numbering probably only several hundred, and not particularly representative of traditional Aboriginal society.[32] Moreover, most of Roth's other research papers were extremely specialised, technical studies and of marginal interest to other than fellow anthropologists. Indeed, there is very little to be gleaned from a reading of Roth's publications of any relevance to the broader subject of early Cooktown.[33]

Of greater use are the more general studies of anthropologists from the 1930s onwards. They include Davidson's *A preliminary register of*

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30 Corfield's account of the killing by Aborigines of the Strau family in October 1874, for example, tends to refute the allegations that the woman and daughter were sexually abused by their killers: see the discussion on 'The Alleged Violation of White Women' in Chapter 3.

31 See W.E. Roth, 'The structure of the Koko-Yimidir language', *North Queensland Ethnography,* Bulletin No. 2, Brisbane, 1901.

32 The impact on Aboriginal society of 'the coming of the white man' to the Cooktown area is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

33 Roth's papers do not, for example, identify the local tribes of the Cooktown-Palmer River area. Rather, they concentrate on such specialised subjects as tribal totems, initiation rites, matriarchal linkages and dialect variations.

Australian tribes and hordes[34] (1938), McConnel's 'Social organisation of the tribes of Cape York Peninsula'[35] (1939-40), Craig's *Cape York*[36] (1967), Elkin's *The Australian Aborigines*[37] (1974) and Tindale's *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia*[38] (1974). Together, those studies provide a reasonably comprehensive account of the Aborigines of the Cooktown-Palmer River area pre-1770, including the names of the tribal groups and certain clans, the delineation of tribal areas and a description of the traditional Aboriginal lifestyle. Certainly, the cited work of the anthropologists is extremely useful in appreciating how the original inhabitants of the area lived before the arrival of Europeans, as well as establishing a benchmark for the discussion and analysis of later race relations.

The Recent 'Popular' Histories

Mention has already been made of Holthouse's *River of gold,* published in 1967. To his credit the book is entertaining, easy to read and informative. It does contain, however, numerous accounts which are clearly exaggerated or sensationalised. There is, for example, no evidence to support Holthouse's assertion that 'hundreds of Chinese and whole tribes of blacks' were killed in racial violence in the Cooktown-Palmer River area in the 1870s.[39] Similarly, in the absence of footnotes, one is left to wonder where Holthouse derived his information on the boisterous nightlife of Cooktown, with his accounts of 'women ... ready to flash a silk-clad thigh or loosely-laced bosom in whatever direction the gold was drifting'.[40]

Glenville Pike has also written numerous accounts of the early history of Far North Queensland. Of relevance to Cooktown are his publications on *Queen of the north: a pictorial history of Cooktown and*

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34 See D.S. Davidson, *A preliminary register of Australian tribes and hordes,* American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, 1938.

35 See U.H. McConnel, 'Social organisation of the tribes of Cape York Peninsula' in *Oceania,* 10, 1, 1939, pp. 54-72 and 10, 4, 1940, pp. 434-55.

36 See B.F. Craig, *Cape York: occasional papers in Aboriginal studies Number 9,* Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1967.

37 See A.P. Elkin, *The Australian Aborigines,* Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1974.

38 See N.B. Tindale, *Aboriginal tribes of Australia,* ANU Press, Canberra, 1974.

39 Holthouse, *River of gold,* p. 36. This issue is discussed in more detail under the heading 'The Balance Sheet of Losses' in Chapter 3.

40 Holthouse, *River of gold,* p. 54.

Cape York Peninsula[41] (1979), *Queensland frontier*[42] (1982), *The last frontier*[43] (1983), *Cape York Peninsula, North Queensland: a guide and historical map*[44] (1984) and *Chasing the rainbow: the golden gullies of the Palmer*[45] (1993). Pike's work, however, has very little analytical content and consists largely of colourful (but uncritical) accounts drawn from a range of readily-available sources. Without wishing to denigrate the work of an obvious enthusiast, Pike's accounts — in the context of their value as previous research on the subject — are somewhat lightweight.

Recent Serious Research

In terms of providing sustainable interpretations on a number of the wider issues relevant to the early development of North Queensland, the more important recent studies include Geoffrey Bolton's *A thousand miles away: a history of North Queensland to 1920*[46] (1963), Ray Evans' *Exclusion, exploitation and extermination: race relations in colonial Queensland*[47] (1975 and 1993), and Geoffrey Blainey's *The rush that never ended: a history of Australian mining*[48] (1978). Two other important works, albeit with a narrower focus, are Denis Murphy's *Prelude to power: the rise of the Labor Party to power in Queensland, 1815-1915*[49] (1970) and Henry Reynold's *Race relations in North Queensland*[50] (1978).

The James Cook University of North Queensland, located in Townsville, has also published a number of specialised studies on Far North

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41 See G. Pike, *Queen of the north: a pictorial history of Cooktown and Cape York Peninsula,* Pinevale, Mareeba, 1979.

42 See G. Pike, *Queensland frontier,* Pinevale, Mareeba, 1982.

43 See G. Pike, *The last frontier,* Pinevale, Mareeba, 1983.

44 See G. Pike, *Cape York Peninsula, North Queensland: a guide and historical map,* Pinevale, Mareeba, 1984.

45 See G. Pike, *Chasing the rainbow: the golden gullies of the Palmer,* Pinevale, Mareeba, 1993.

46 See G.C. Bolton, *A thousand miles away: a history of North Queensland to 1920,* Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1963.

47 See R.L. Evans *et al, Exclusion, exploitation and extermination: race relations in colonial Queensland,* ANZ Book Company, Sydney, 1975 (and the 1993 edition).

48 See G. Blainey, *The rush that never ended: a history of Australian mining,* Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1978.

49 D. Murphy *et al, Prelude to power: the rise of the Labor Party to power in Queensland, 1815-1915,* University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1980.

50 See H. Reynolds (ed.), *Race relations in North Queensland,* James Cook University, Townsville, 1978.

Queensland concentrating, in particular, on mining and early race relations. In addition to Reynold's *Race relations in North Queensland,* they include the four general series of *Lectures on North Queensland history*[51] and Kett Kennedy's *Readings in North Queensland mining history.*[52] Within those publications are the noteworthy contributions on race relations by Henry Reynolds, Noel Loos, Cathie May and Noreen Kirkman.[53]

A number of very useful academic theses, of relevance to Cooktown and its surrounds, have also been written over the past decade or so, with several subsequently published. They include Barnett's 'A study of the Queensland Native Mounted Police in the 1870s',[54] Bell's 'Housing and mining settlement in North Queensland 1861-1920',[55] Brown's 'A history of the Gilbert River goldfield 1869-1874',[56] Farnfield's 'George Elphinstone Dalrymple - his life and times in Queensland 1859-74',[57] Lewis' 'A history of the ports of Queensland 1859-1939',[58] Stoodley's 'The Queensland goldminer in the late nineteenth century: his influence and interests'[59] and Wegner's 'The Etheridge: a study of the history of the Etheridge shire and goldfield 1875-1960'.[60]

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51 See *Lectures on North Queensland history,* 1st series, James Cook University of North Queensland, Townsville, 1974 (and 2nd series 1975, 3rd series 1978 and 4th series 1984).

52 See K.H. Kennedy (ed.), *Readings in North Queensland mining history,* Vol. 1, James Cook University of North Queensland, Townsville, 1980 (and Vol. 2, 1982).

53 Reynolds and Loos, in particular, have other important publications in H. Reynolds, *The other side of the frontier: Aboriginal resistance to the European invasion of Australia,* Penguin, Ringwood, 1982 and N.A. Loos, *Invasion and resistance,* ANU Press, Canberra, 1982.

54 S. Barnett, 'A Study of the Queensland Native Mounted Police in the 1870s', BA (Hons) thesis, University of Queensland, 1975.

55 P. Bell, 'Houses and mining settlement in North Queensland 1861-1920', PhD thesis, James Cook University, 1982.

56 R.B. Brown, 'A history of the Gilbert River goldfield 1869-1874', BA (Hons) thesis, James Cook University, 1974.

57 D.J. Farnfield, 'George Elphinstone Dalrymple - his life and times in Queensland 1859-74', PhD thesis, University of Queensland, 1968. Since published as J. Farnfield, *Frontiersman: a biography of G.E. Dalrymple,* Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1968.

58 G. Lewis, 'A history of the ports of Queensland 1859-1939: a study in Australian economic nationalism', PhD thesis, University of Queensland, 1971. Since published as G. Lewis, *A history of the ports of Queensland,* Queensland University Press, Brisbane, 1973.

59 J. Stoodley, 'The Queensland goldminer in the late nineteenth century: his influence and interests', MA thesis, University of Queensland, 1964.

60 J. Wegner, 'The Etheridge: a study of the history of the Etheridge shire and goldfield 1875-1960', BA/BEd (Hons) thesis, James Cook University, 1980. Since published as J. Wegner, *The Etheridge,* James Cook University, Townsville, 1990.

What emerges from the preceding paragraphs is that notwithstanding the volume of recent research material on Far North Queensland, very little has been written on the development of Cooktown itself or on the strategic relationship between Cooktown and the Palmer River goldfields. Yet in its composite form, the literature on Far North Queensland reveals that a number of the themes of regional, Queensland and national history have been assumed to fit the Cooktown experience.

It seems useful, therefore, to identify and discuss those themes with a view to establishing where, in reality, the history of Cooktown challenges the current interpretations on, for example, urbanisation, mining, race relations and the development of a Queensland or national ethos. It could also be expected that additional interpretations would emerge from a detailed study of Cooktown — such as the earlier discussion on the failure of the town to diversify — which might have wider significance elsewhere.

The Traditional Interpretations

There is, of course, no definitive list of either the narrower or wider interpretations which traditionally have been applied to Cooktown. At least fifteen general interpretations seem obvious, which can be grouped for the purposes of discussion under the broad headings of early race relations in Far North Queensland, the *raison d'être* of a frontier mining town, the process of small town urbanisation, the role of mining towns in the wider development of Queensland, the issue of Chinese immigration, the development of a Queensland or national ethos and the structural viability of coastal towns in Queensland.

Early Race Relations

One interpretation or traditional assumption has been that the physical environment in the vicinity of the Endeavour River landing was pristine and largely untouched by Europeans prior to the arrival of the

expedition of Howard St George and A.C. Macmillan in late October 1873.[61] The corollary has been that racial violence in the Cooktown-Palmer River area began with the influx of European settlers to Cooktown and was exacerbated by the passage of white and Chinese miners to the Palmer River goldfields. Cilento's account of racial conflict in the area, for example, begins with the statement that '[t]he first party of miners who set out from Cooktown were ambushed by blacks'.[62]

The obvious weakness in this interpretation is that it overlooks the deleterious role of early white explorers in 'setting the stage' for later race relations. It also takes insufficient account of the ongoing exploitation of Aborigines in the *bêche-de-mer* industry, which began at least a decade before the arrival of the first white settlers at the Endeavour River.[63]

A ***second*** interpretation has been that racial conflict in the Cooktown-Palmer area was more violent, and with an Aboriginal response more purposeful, than arguably anywhere else in Australia.[64] While the assertion itself undoubtedly has some basis, the reasons for it are less developed. One early explanation was advanced by the explorer Dalrymple, who suggested that the 'blood-thirsty bullying scoundrels' he clashed with may have come originally from the same ethnic stock as their more warlike Polynesian and Papuan neighbours.[65]

More recently, Loos has suggested that it was the terrain of the dense tropical rainforest to the east of the Great Dividing Range which facilitated Aboriginal resistance, by providing a refuge against the superior technology and political organisation of the white invaders.[66] A further explanation would seem to relate to the unusually long period of

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61 *The Cooktown Herald,* for example, maintained that 'we have it on record that the only actual pioneers who landed after Captain Cook were ... Messrs Howard St George ... and Macmillan': see *CHPRA,* 28 October 1876, p. 2.

62 See R. Cilento, *Triumph in the tropics,* Smith and Paterson, Brisbane, 1959, p. 203. Other reports suggest that it was whites who initiated this particular clash: see 'The Arrival of Miners and Settlers' in Chapter 3.

63 For an account of the exploitation of Aborigines on the sea frontier, see Loos, *Invasion and resistance,* Chapter 5, pp. 118-59.

64 See N. Loos, 'A chapter of contact: Aboriginal-European relations in North Queensland 1606-1992' in Reynolds, *Race relations,* p. 8 and Reynolds, *The other side of the frontier,* p. 198.

65 See Dalrymple, 'Narrative', p. 631.

66 See Loos, 'A chapter of contact', pp. 16-7.

intermittent contact between Europeans and Aborigines in the Cooktown-Palmer area, which spanned close to 100 years, and which may have led the local Aborigines to believe that they were able to keep out the white 'invaders'.

A ***third*** traditional interpretation has been that the number of Aborigines, Europeans and Chinese killed in racial conflict in the area totalled many hundreds, if not thousands. Mention has already been made of Holthouse's assertion of 'hundreds of Chinese and whole tribes of blacks' being killed. Cilento similarly claims that 'the blacks killed every white man they trapped ... [while] miners and packers shot every black on sight'.[67] Cilento also asserts that

> [t]housands of ... [Chinese] were killed and eaten by the ferocious myalls of the Palmer, whose epicurean taste considered them equal to the choicest bandicoot.[68]

Intuitively, such versions of racial conflict in the Cooktown-Palmer area seem grossly exaggerated. Certainly, there is very little evidence to support Holthouse's assertion of 'hundreds of Chinese' being killed by Aborigines.[69] There is also no convincing account of a single European or Chinese miner or carrier being eaten by Aborigines in the Cooktown-Palmer area.[70] The challenge in refuting such claims is being able to quantify a more plausible account of the losses sustained by both sides, particularly in the 'frontier' years of the 1870s.

The Raison D'être of a Frontier Mining Town

A ***fourth*** interpretation has been that the township of Cooktown was established, on the instructions of the authorities in Brisbane, as the

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67 Cilento, *Triumph in the tropics,* p. 203.

68 Cilento, *Triumph in the tropics,* p. 203. Somewhat more conservatively, Holthouse asserts that 'hundreds [of Chinese] were eaten': see Holthouse, *River of gold,* p. 94.

69 A detailed study by Loos, for example, put the number of Chinese killed between 1873 and 1880 at ten confirmed, five probable and a further seven possible: see Loos, *Invasion and resistance,* Appendix B 'Settlers and their employees reportedly killed as a result of Aboriginal resistance in North Queensland between 1861 and 1897', pp. 194-247, although Loos concedes that there undoubtedly were more unrecorded deaths.

70 See E.G. Heap, 'Some notes on cannibalism among Queensland Aborigines, 1824-1900' in *Queensland Heritage,* 1, 7, November 1967, p. 27.

service centre and market outlet for the Palmer River goldfields.[71] The corollary is that the townspeople of Cooktown could then have reasonably expected an equitable share of government funding and other resources, especially in the formative years of the town.

An alternative view is that the Government initially saw Cooktown as a temporary resupply port for the Palmer River goldfields with its *raison d'être* being primarily to avoid an embarrassing repeat of what had occurred at the Canoona gold rush, in the Port Curtis district, in 1858.[72] If that interpretation is correct, the Government had probably given no particular thought — or financial commitment — to the longer-term future of the settlement, nor would it have been particularly inclined to do so in the months that followed.

A ***fifth*** traditional interpretation has been the associated view that Cooktown's inability to attract its 'fair share' of resources was largely a reflection of the unwillingness of successive governments in Brisbane to promote rural regional development.[73] Certainly, in the early to mid 1870s, the issue was a driving force behind the movement calling for the separation of North Queensland, with its lively debate over which of the coastal towns should become the 'capital of the north'.[74]

The unresolved question is whether the authorities in Brisbane were really biased against rural development. Was it rather that successive

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71 *Bailliere's Guide* of 1876, for example, described Cooktown as 'the seaport ... [and] centre ... [for] alluvial gold mining ... at Normanby ... and the Palmer': see R.P. Whitworth (ed.), *Bailliere's Queensland gazetteer and road guide,* Bailliere, Brisbane, 1876, p. 52.

72 At Canoona, thousands of would-be miners, who had rushed to the district on the strength of exaggerated reports of an otherwise modest gold discovery, were left in desperate straits when their money and rations ran out: see J.F. Hogan, *The Gladstone colony: an unwritten chapter of Australian history,* Brooks, Sydney, 1987, p. 125.

73 See, for example, the editorial in *The Cooktown Herald* bemoaning that '[t]he government have done nothing for us; they have retarded rather than assisted the progress of the town': *CHPRA,* 25 November 1874, p. 2. Earlier at Gympie, the attitude of the government similarly appeared to be that development was up to individual enterprise and self-help: see W.R. Johnston, *The call of the land: a history of Queensland to the present day,* Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1982, p. 78.

74 See, for example, the editorial in *CHPRA,* 17 October 1874, p. 2. See also the editorial of 9 December 1874 accusing the government of being '[p]rofuse in promises ... when such expenditure is to be made in the South': *CHPRA,* 9 December 1874, p. 2.

governments were simply cynical as to the longer-term viability of frontier mining towns, having already experienced the demise of Gilberton and its associated fields, and the earlier exhaustion of the goldfields at Mount Wyatt, near Bowen, and Cape River, near Townsville?[75]

The Process of Small Town Urbanisation

A ***sixth*** interpretation has been that Cooktown started life as a fledgling township, with A.C. Macmillan advising the Secretary for Works on 30 October 1873 that 'I have chosen the immediate neighbourhood of Captain Cook's landing for the Township'.[76] The reasonable assumption would be that Cooktown would then have acquired, over the ensuing months, a reasonable array of government representation and services, and that its growth would have been in broad conformity with the physical patterns of urbanisation elsewhere.

Early descriptions of the settlement, however, indicate that official representation related primarily to the collection of customs revenue through the port.[77] Moreover, the physical configuration of the township was very linear, with a single main street — lined with businesses — stretching from the vicinity of the harbour southwards along the track towards the Palmer River.[78] Although Cooktown was not unique in this regard, the obvious question is whether a single street, catering primarily for the needs of would-be miners and visitors from the goldfields, was a viable configuration for an aspiring business community, in terms of the necessary interfaces between the wharf area, wholesale and retail outlets, the tertiary services, government services, local residents and the passing trade.

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75 Note also that on several occasions in the 1870s, public expenditure on facilities in North Queensland was opposed by southern interests on the grounds that it would only benefit the Chinese: see C.R. May, 'Chinese-European relations in Cairns during the 1890s' in *Lectures on North Queensland history,* 3rd series, James Cook University, Townsville, 1978, p. 160.

76 A.C. Macmillan to the Secretary for Works, despatch 30 October 1873, in-letter 4598/73 of 1873, WOR/A74, Queensland State Archives (QSA).

77 See, for example, the editorial of 25 November 1874 accusing the government of being '[a]nxious only to collect the revenue of the port': *CHPRA,* 25 November 1874, p. 2.

78 See the description that 'Cooktown consists of one long irregular street stretching from the government reserve for about half-a-mile': *The Brisbane Courier,* 27 February 1874, p. 3.

A ***seventh*** traditional interpretation has been that the early settlers in Cooktown attempted to replicate urban infrastructure and building design from their home villages and towns in the United Kingdom. Stephens, for example, notes in his account of the early history of Cooktown 'the adoption of English customs including a town crier ... [and] stone pitching, curbing and channelling, another English practice'.[79] Similarly, Bell has asserted that 'the nature of housing [in North Queensland] was determined by the origins of the immigrant population .... [while] adaption to the physical environment was a secondary concern'.[80]

Any number of photographs of early Cooktown, however, show a distinctly Australian house-form in many of the buildings, that is, timber-framed, weatherboard-clad structures with an iron roof.[81] Moreover, the prevalence of verandahs and the use of stumps to raise buildings above ground level would tend to indicate that adaptation to the physical environment, in Cooktown anyway, was perhaps more common than Bell's conclusion may suggest. In relation to the use of stone for road-works, the question would seem to be whether the local authorities were slavishly copying British practices, or simply making good use of a readily-available local resource.

The Wider Role of Mining Towns

An ***eighth*** interpretation has been that the discovery of alluvial gold at the Palmer River was an important factor in attracting population both to Far North Queensland and to Queensland as a whole in the 1870s and early 1880s.[82] An editorial in *The Brisbane Courier* in January 1874, for example, noted that

> the chief benefit the colony derives is ... the ultimate certainty that gold in the north of Queensland ...

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79 S.E. Stephens, 'The Endeavour River and Cooktown', *Queensland Heritage,* 2, 2, May 1970, p. 24.

80 Bell, 'Houses and mining settlement', p. iii.

81 For a discussion of the Australian house-form in North Queensland, see R. Sumner, 'Pioneer homesteads of North Queensland' in *Lectures on North Queensland history,* 1st series, James Cook University, Townsville, 1974, pp. 47-62.

82 See, for example, Holthouse, *River of gold,* pp. 1-2.

> will prove the first attraction ... [to a] population ...
> [that will eventually] settle down to other pursuits
> and promote the permanent settlement of the country.[83]

Official statistics show that the population of Queensland increased rapidly from 125,000 in 1871 to around 180,000 in 1875, and then to 226,000 by 1880.[84] Moreover, close to 60 per cent of the new arrivals between 1874 and 1880 were from overseas, as opposed to arrivals from other Australian colonies.[85] The importance of the discovery of gold in attracting immigrants, though, probably should not be overstated and needs to be seen in the context of the Queensland Government's active program of assisted immigration and other inducements already in operation across the period.[86]

It is also not particularly clear, from the traditional interpretation, as to the place of origin of new settlers to Cooktown and would-be miners bound for the Palmer. It is conventional wisdom that most of the Chinese in Far North Queensland came directly from Hong Kong or Canton. But how many Chinese came also from other Australian colonies or from an indentured work-place elsewhere? Similarly, how many of Cooktown's residents came from elsewhere in Queensland or from other Australian colonies, against direct arrivals from overseas? Conversely, how long did most people stay in Cooktown and where did they move to when they departed?

A ***ninth*** and associated interpretation, mentioned earlier in this chapter, has been that the discovery of gold in Far North Queensland fuelled public optimism and contributed significantly to the economic development of Queensland into the 1880s.[87] Less developed is the extent to

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83 *The Brisbane Courier,* 29 January 1874, p. 3.

84 See reports of the Registrar-General in *QVP,* 2, 1874, p. 7; *QVP,* 2, 1876, p. 376 and *QVP,* 1, 1881, p. 873.

85 Immigrants comprised 79,736 of the overall population increase of 133, 551 between 1874 and 1880: see the discussion by Coghlan, *Labour and industry in Australia,* p. 1294.

86 See, for example, Johnston, *The call of the land,* p. 90 and J.C.R. Camm, 'The hunt for muscle and bone: emigration agents and their role in migration to Queensland during the 1880s', *Australian Historical Geography Bulletin,* February 1981, pp. 7-29.

87 See, for example, Laverty, 'The Queensland economy', p. 30.

which the discovery of gold was successful in attracting investment capital to Cooktown and the Palmer River (and Hodgkinson) goldfields.

Between 1875 and 1880, for example, the value of mining equipment in Far North Queensland increased from £5000 to £70,500.[88] Yet civic leaders in Cooktown spent much of their time at public meetings in the late 1870s blaming the imminent demise of the goldfields on the lack of investment capital.[89] The obvious question is why were Cooktown and the Palmer able to trigger an investment boom but were themselves unable to access the spoils? Was it because of the lack of investment, or the absence of readily-discoverable reef gold and other exploitable resources?

The Issue of Chinese Immigration

A ***tenth*** traditional interpretation has been that the 20,000 or more Chinese miners who flooded into the goldfields of Far North Queensland between 1874 and 1877 not only rapidly denuded the region of its alluvial gold but took back to China the bulk of the gold they won, with little or no return to the people or government of Queensland.[90] An editorial in *The Cooktown Herald* of May 1876, for example, complained that the Chinese

> enjoy all the rights and privileges of the European ... supplied at the expense of the State ... [but they] then return to their native land, without having in the least contributed to the benefit of the country, from which they have obtained such tangible benefits.[91]

The assumption behind this interpretation would seem to be that almost all the costs associated with the production of gold by Chinese miners were also in the hands of Chinese financiers or businessmen. Yet Chinese businessmen would obviously have paid customs duties on goods

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88 See, *QVP,* 2, 1876, p. 713 and *QVP,* 1, 1885, p. 1085.

89 See, for example, the report of the public meeting of 30 April 1879 in *The Cooktown Courier,* 3 May 1879, p. 2 and the editorial of 24 December 1879 asserting that '[c]apital and labour are alone required to develope [sic] this district in all its importance': *The Cooktown Courier,* 24 December 1879, p. 2.

90 See, for example, Holthouse, *River of gold,* p. 140 asserting that gold valued at £400,000 went to China in 1876-77 and that 'the amount smuggled out ... must have been much more'.

91 *CHPRA,* 17 May 1876, p. 2.

imported from China, while Chinese miners would have paid licence fees. Nevertheless, there has been very little research done on the arrangements for the shipping of would-be Chinese miners to Cooktown, on their initial provisioning or on their subsequent maintenance and resupply whilst at the goldfields. How extensive (and influential in civic affairs), for example, were the Chinese business communities in Cooktown and at the Palmer, and to what extent did the Chinese actively engage in the carrying trade between the two centres?

There is also the inference in the interpretation that if the Chinese had been excluded from Far North Queensland, a lesser number of European miners could have gained remunerative employment on the goldfields for many more years, thereby prolonging the commercial viability of Cooktown.[92] The rejoinder would be that the Chinese were generally not interested in prospecting but concentrated their efforts on alluvial workings discarded by European miners in their pursuit of richer fields.[93] Whether or not European miners would have been prepared to re-work alluvial deposits for a second, third or even fourth time — as were the Chinese — is a moot point.

An ***eleventh*** interpretation has been that the anti-Chinese sentiment which evolved in Cooktown (and other northern towns) during the 1870s and early 1880s was an important factor in the development of unionism and union attitudes in Queensland, as well as in Australia's post-Federation restrictive immigration policy.[94] When a number of Chinese immigrants arrived in Cooktown in July 1874, they were cautiously welcomed with one of the local newspapers asserting that 'we are pleased to see [these] new arrivals'.[95] By late 1876, the public image of the Chinese

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92 This line of reasoning appeared frequently in contemporary discussions of Chinese immigration to Queensland: see, for example, the editorial in *The Cooktown Herald* of May 1877 discussing the 'immense tract of land on the Palmer, which would for years have supported a large European mining population': *CHPRA,* 9 May 1877, p. 2.

93 See the editorial in *The Cooktown Herald* of July 1875 noting that the Chinese were proving 'particularly successful at such of our goldfields as are partly worked out and reckoned too poor to pay the labour of the European': *CHPRA,* 17 July 1875, p. 2.

94 On the issue of the perceived threat to living and labour standards of white Australians, see Johnston, *The call of the land,* pp. 70-4.

95 *CHPRA,* 15 July 1874, p. 5.

had tarnished, with a local newspaper vociferous in its criticism of 'the evil-smelling fragment of a Chinese back slum ... [a] haunt of foetid vice'.[96]

It would seem, however, that the view of Cooktown's business community was more ambivalent. The reality that the Chinese typically worked long and difficult hours for far less remuneration than Europeans was clearly seen as a threat to the standard of living of white Australians.[97] The perception, though, that the 'depression [in Cooktown] has increased three-fold since the final check was given to Chinese immigration' led *The Cooktown Courier* to ponder 'whether in so strongly advocating its total cessation we did not virtually cut a rod for our own backs'.[98] In that respect, there would appear to be some unanswered questions over the importance of the Chinese to the commercial viability of Cooktown.

The Development of a Queensland or National Ethos

A **twelfth** interpretation has been that the early settlers to Cooktown epitomised the pioneering spirit of Australia, with their readiness to sally forth into the dangers and hardships of the 'unknown' in pursuit of a better lifestyle and, hopefully, their fortune.[99] Less clear is how many of the early settlers had any intention of staying for any length of time, unlike on the pastoral frontier where settlers frequently planned to establish a family home and remain indefinitely. A number of the would-be settlers embarking from Brisbane on board the SS *Lord Ashley* on 16 January 1874, for example, were small storekeepers 'who have migrated with their effects, in the hope of making a "pile" ',[100] suggesting perhaps that their aim was a quick profit rather than any thought of actually 'settling'.

The associated issue was the contemporary perception that Europeans were not well suited to either residence or physical labour in the tropics and that 'imported' labour was usually necessary for menial and

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96 *The Cooktown Courier,* 20 December 1876, p. 2.

97 See, for example, the address of B.P. Palmer, candidate for the Cook electorate, to a business group in Cooktown on 23 October 1878, as reported in the single-page supplement to *The Cooktown Courier,* 26 October 1878.

98 *The Cooktown Courier,* 19 April 1879, p. 2.

99 See, for example, *The Brisbane Courier,* 17 January 1874, p. 4 describing a group about to embark for the Endeavour River as 'adventurers'.

100 *The Brisbane Courier,* 17 January 1874, p. 4.

physically-demanding tasks.[101] It was grudgingly perceived by the early white settlers, therefore, that the Chinese were better suited to the climate than they, adding another dimension to the anti-Chinese sentiment discussed previously.[102] Moreover, the widely-held view that Europeans could only live in the tropics for short periods before returning to cooler climates to recuperate would seem to add further ambiguity to the popular view of 'hardy pioneers'.[103]

A ***thirteenth*** traditional interpretation has been that most of the early European business-people in Cooktown, as well as white miners, operated as individuals or perhaps in partnership with one other.[104] The reasons for it are less clear. The popular notion is that the practice derived from the evolving ethos of being one's own boss, as opposed to being employed.[105] The consequence was that individuals were usually unable to attract the capital, or the economies of scale, necessary to operate successfully either as a more permanent miner on the Palmer or a medium-size business-person in Cooktown. It does seem, therefore, that more research could usefully be done on the issue.

The Structural Viability of Coastal Towns

A ***fourteenth*** interpretation has been that those who profited most from the discovery of gold at the Palmer River were not the prospectors or miners but those engaged in the service industries — the storekeepers, the publicans and the carriers operating both at Cooktown and on the goldfields themselves.[106] Indeed, the carrying trade was so

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101 See, for example, R.W. Cilento, 'The white settlement of tropical Australia' in P.D. Phillips and G.L. Wood (eds.), *The peopling of Australia,* Macmillan, Melbourne, 1928, pp. 229-30, who added that 'any white children [produced] would be sickly, frail and sterile'.

102 See *CHPRA,* 12 September 1877, p. 2, advocating the employment of 'coloured' labour to construct railways and sugar, cotton, coffee and tea plantations in the north.

103 See Cilento, 'The white settlement', pp. 229-30.

104 See, for example, the description of miners at the Palmer operating alone or in small groups in N. Kirkman, 'The Palmer River goldfield' in K.H. Kennedy (ed.), *Readings in North Queensland mining history,* Vol. 1, James Cook University, Townsville, 1980, p. 115.

105 See, for example, A. Trollope, *Australia and New Zealand,* George Robertson, Melbourne, 1873, p. 53 discussing the same issue in relation to Gympie.

106 See, for example, Allen, *A visit to Queensland,* pp. 132-3.

lucrative, peaking at £200 per ton on February 1874, that Corfield noted that it was not unusual to see ex-station managers, police inspectors and even retired naval officers engaged in the trade.[107]

No serious attempt seems to have been made, however, to quantify the annual turnover of the carrying trade and retail outlets in Cooktown, for example, or to identify the number of individuals or firms involved in the various service industries. How much profit, for example, was a bullock-team plying the route between Cooktown and the Palmer River likely to have made in the years 1874-78? Similarly, how many European and Chinese wholesale and retail traders were operating in Cooktown across the same years? Furthermore, and importantly, how critical were the service industries to the structural viability of Cooktown?

A ***fifteenth*** and final traditional interpretation — as discussed earlier in this chapter — has been that Cooktown's viability was inextricably linked to the viability of the Palmer River goldfields and that once the Palmer slid into decline, Cooktown followed suit. The undeveloped issues are why civic and business leaders in the town continued to talk up the prospects of the Palmer and why Cooktown failed to diversify as a market outlet or processing or service centre for other industries or settlements.

The Available Sources

Before considering the approach to the study, it also seems useful to identify and discuss the available sources, in addition to those already mentioned in the context of previous research material. For the purposes of discussion, they can be grouped under archival records; parliamentary papers; government publications and other official records; newspapers; maps, photographs and plans; other primary source material; and the physical environment and surviving artefacts.

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107 Corfield, *Reminiscences of Queensland,* p. 70.

Archival Records

In an informal address to the Brisbane History Group several years ago, attended by the writer, the Queensland State Archivist suggested that historians should establish the availability of source material in the very early stages of any intended study. She then went on to counsel against any serious research of Far North Queensland, on the basis that many of the early records have either been lost or damaged by the vagaries of the tropical climate.

A detailed search of records at the Queensland State Archives repository, however, has revealed that most of the Brisbane-originated primary source materials in relation to Cooktown have survived, as have a reasonable number of records from Cooktown itself. The complete range of correspondence between early administrators in Cooktown and both the Colonial Secretary's office and the Department of Works, for example, is readily available, as is the correspondence to and from the Treasury, Lands, Police, Customs and Education Departments.

A considerable array of other material is also available, including electoral rolls, early local authority records of the Cook Shire Council, the records of the Clerk of the Court of Petty Sessions (offences, licences and registrations), school registers, petitions to the Colonial Secretary, customs records of all incoming and outgoing cargo, and registers of the sale of crown lands by public auction. Shipping passenger lists, providing details of those who arrived in Cooktown from England and Europe, are also available from 1881 onwards. The difficulty in the shipping records is with immigrants from China, who were not listed by name and, of course, in differentiating between new arrivals destined for the goldfields and those intent on settling in Cooktown.

In a more general sense, the problem with the available archival records is that the material is too detailed for a broad-ranging study of an urban centre such as Cooktown. Indeed, the challenge in researching archival material for this study has been to avoid becoming too embroiled in detail or spending an inordinate amount of time in pursuit of a relatively trivial issue.

Parliamentary Papers

Probably one of the most useful sources for this study has proved to be the annual *Votes and proceedings of the Legislative Assembly of Queensland [QVP]*. Copies of *QVP* for the period 1873-85 are available at most university libraries, the larger state public libraries and the National Library in Canberra. They contain such legislative matters as the daily business of parliament, notices of motions and orders of the day, reports of divisions in committee, petitions received and reports of committees. They also contain the annual reports of all major Queensland government departments, the yearly 'blue books' of official statistics, details of annual government expenditure and forecasts, and official census data.

They also contain the findings of royal commissions and other official inquiries and investigations, as well as the reports of government-sponsored geological and exploratory expeditions. The one difficulty encountered is that much of the annual statistical data is recorded by electoral or police district, rather than by urban centre. While it is easy, therefore, to find the population of the Cook district in 1875 or the amount spent each year on roads and bridges, it is often nigh on impossible to ascertain from *QVP* the same information for Cooktown itself.

Another readily-available source is the *Queensland Parliamentary Debates [QPD]*. They are a verbatim record of parliamentary proceedings, on a year-by-year basis, and consist primarily of the numerous speeches associated with the passage of proposed legislation. They have been of only limited value to this study, principally because any parliamentary remark of consequence was typically reported on by Cooktown or Brisbane newspapers with a more useful commentary than that contained in the debate.

Government Publications and Other Official Records

Another important and readily-available source is the *Queensland Government Gazettes* for the period. They contain, for example, the names of individuals, by town, issued with licences to trade as a business, to deal in the sale of spirits, to operate a billiard room or to conduct government auctions. They also contain details of individuals,

again by town, registered as medical practitioners, or holding official or civic appointments, ranging from the police magistrate or superintendent of the town's fire brigade to trustees of the local cemetery.

Usefully, the *Government Gazettes* also contain details of all official tenders advertised and let (notably for public works and buildings), as well as the half-yearly financial statements for all municipalities and councils. They also provide information on the gazettal of reserves, stock routes, quarantine stations etc, as well as details of proclamations and district or municipal regulations. When synthesised, the information within *Government Gazettes* can contribute significantly towards an understanding of the civic framework within a particular urban centre.

Another potentially valuable official source, unfortunately not easily accessed, are the registers of births, deaths and marriages from the period. Somewhat surprisingly, these have survived in good condition in hard-copy form and are located in the office of the Clerk of the Court in Cooktown. Under existing privacy guidelines, however, their custodian refuses to allow general access to them, notwithstanding that none of the individuals involved (nor probably any of their children) could be alive today to be concerned by their release.[108]

Newspapers

The two local newspapers, from the period, *The Cooktown Courier* and *The Cooktown Herald and Palmer River Advertiser,* both produced their first editions in March 1874. *The Cooktown Courier* continued to publish on a weekly or bi-weekly basis across the period although, inexplicably, there is a gap in the surviving coverage between December 1879 and January 1888. *The Cooktown Herald* ceased publication in December 1877. Those gaps aside, microfilm copies of most issues of both newspapers are available, at

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108 It is, of course, possible to obtain copies of a particular registration item upon payment of a fee. If the registers were Commonwealth records, however, any researcher could probably obtain unrestricted access to them, given that most personal records are released after 30 years, while even the most sensitive personal information (under section 33(1)(g) of the *Archives Act*) would normally be released after 100 years: see guidelines on the 'unreasonable disclosure of personal affairs' in the *Australian Archives Access Manual: Part 1 Access Policy*, Australian Archives, Canberra, 1984, p. 1BI5.11.

least, at the John Oxley Library in Brisbane, the James Cook University in Townsville and the National Library in Canberra.

Both newspapers are an invaluable source of information on the early years of Cooktown and the Palmer River goldfields. Their editorials, often presenting opposing views, provide a reasonably balanced view on a range of topical issues, while most editions contained at least one page of current news, being a combination of factual snippets, social gossip and excerpts from newspapers elsewhere. Shipping arrivals and departures were typically included, with a number of editions also recording the details of inward cargo manifests. The several pages devoted to advertisements also provide useful information on the number and diversity of businesses operating in the town, as well as an indication of the range and price of goods and services typically available.

Both newspapers also provided a reasonably comprehensive coverage of civic affairs, ranging from an often verbatim account of public meetings and civic receptions to a 'social pages' type account of spring balls, race regattas, church fêtes and school award nights. The common criticism of newspapers as a historical source — that they are not necessarily representative of the subject population — certainly applied to Cooktown in that the Chinese community, in particular, typically rated barely a mention.

In addition to the local publications, there were of course a range of other regional and Queensland-wide newspapers in circulation at the time. *The Brisbane Courier,* in particular, is a very useful source for coverage of the early days of Far North Queensland and, especially, for the six months or so prior to the first local editions. *The Cleveland Bay Express,* published in Townsville, also has some useful reports from one of its correspondents who visited Cooktown and the Palmer River in October and November 1873.

Maps, Photographs and Plans

Given the readiness of officials in early Queensland to document their particular circumstances, it is perhaps surprising that more maps of early Cooktown are not in existence. The only surviving maps from the period (as opposed to drawings and diagrams in support of letters and

petitions) seem to be the two compiled by the Survey Branch of the Lands Department in 1878 and by the Surveyor-General's office in 1885.[109]

The usefulness of such maps is that they show the physical layout and dimensions of the town at a particular point in time. The 1878 map also shows, for example, the location of the main government offices and the outline of residential and business allotments, as well as the names of individual title holders. The 1885 map, which is larger-scale, shows the environs of Cooktown south to the Annan River. It illustrates that the town had almost doubled in size since 1878 and that by 1885 Cooktown also had a cemetery, race-course, railway reserve, quarantine station and rifle range.

Fortunately, there are literally hundreds of photographs of early Cooktown still in existence. The History Department of the James Cook University at Townsville holds an extensive collection, as does the John Oxley Library in Brisbane. In their composite form, they illustrate such matters as street-scapes, architectural styles, building materials, the condition of roads and side-walks, types of transport, wharf and stevedoring facilities, clothing styles and forms of entertainment. Their main limitation is the frequent lack of accompanying explanation and date.

There is also a reasonable collection of plans still in existence of early public buildings and works in Cooktown. They include, for example, plans prepared by the Department of Works for the construction of primary school buildings[110] and by the Hydraulic Engineer's Department for a town water supply.[111] Some of the plans are useful in the context of drawing more general conclusions about construction materials or the appropriateness of building designs to the climate of Far North Queensland. Most of them, however, are too detailed to be of much use in a broad urban study.

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109 Copies are held at the Queensland State Archives: see map, Town of Cooktown, County of Banks, District of Cook, Survey Branch, Lands Department, 1878, A/9236, QSA and map, Environs of Cooktown, Survey Office, Brisbane, 1885, N3, QSA.

110 See Works Department, Plans, Cooktown State School, PD 95.21-23, QSA.

111 See 'Cooktown Water Supply Report' of 4 December 1884 in *QVP,* 3, 1884, p. 861.

Other Primary Source Material

Most of the primary source material has already been mentioned in the context of previous research. There is, in addition, a number of Queensland-wide almanacs and directories which provide some useful detail. *Pugh's Almanac,* for example, contains an annual diary of key events for the previous year, as well as a listing by name of government officials in each town.[112] *Post Office Directories,* only available from 1883/84 onwards, provide an annual listing by town of key government officials and prominent business-men and-women,[113] while *Bailliere's Queensland Gazetteer* provides a brief description of early Cooktown, including its geography and main businesses.[114]

A considerable range of primary source material is also available in Cooktown itself. As mentioned already, most of the early records associated with the shire and municipal council have been transferred to the State Archives. The local historical society, however, has preserved a good collection of 'memorabilia' from early Cooktown including documents, photographs and ephemeral artefacts. The James Cook Historical Museum also houses a similar but more comprehensive collection, spanning from pre-1873 to the present.

Because the period in question, 1873-85, is well beyond living memory, oral interviews have not been pursued as an available source option, notwithstanding that some historians would assert that the experiences of the past can still be reached through succeeding generations.[115] It is accepted that oral data, when collected systematically and focused on specific research questions, can contribute vital information that otherwise would not have been obtainable. Taking into account, however, the reasonable availability of other source material — and the

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112 The most detailed for Cooktown across the period 1874-85 is the 1878 edition: see *Pugh's Queensland almanac, law calendar, directory, coast guide and gazetteer,* Thorne, Brisbane, 1878.

113 See *Queensland Post Office Directory,* Wise, Watson and Ferguson, Brisbane, 1883/84.

114 See, for example, *Bailliere's Queensland gazetteer,* 1876, p. 52.

115 See, for example, J. Bodnar, *Workers' world: township, community and protest in an industrial society, 1900-1940,* John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1982, p. 8 and his assertion that experiences back to the 1880s can still be reached through the reminiscences of succeeding generations.

reality that people often sentimentalise the idea of community in the past — oral history sources have not been pursued.

The Physical Environment and Surviving Artefacts

Finally, it is axiomatic that Cooktown today is itself a source in terms of the physical environment which existed in the 1870s. The weather, the harbour, the terrain, the physical layout of the town, the location of the court-house, police station, hospital, school, and cemetery, for example, are as they were 120 years ago. Because of a combination of climate, cyclones, fires and the process of time, however, very few artefacts have survived. Perhaps ironically, the only relics identifiable as such are the headstones in the Cooktown cemetery.[116]

An Approach to the Study

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the central theme of this study is the demise of Cooktown in the late 1870s and the associated issues of why the town failed to diversify, why successive governments in Brisbane failed to detect the decline until it was almost a *fait accompli* and why business and civic leaders in Cooktown continued to 'talk up' the town's prospects. In deciding how best to approach those questions, several issues of methodology are deserving of discussion.

Urban, Social or Local History?

Whether the study should be considered urban history, social history or local history is probably a moot point. Since antiquity, writers have been recording the happenings within towns and cities, and the historical development of individual urban centres. Many of these 'urban biographies' present masses of carefully assembled facts which, for the modern historian, provide significant insights into general themes of urban

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116 Monumental inscriptions and the burial register form the basis of a very useful recent study by the Cairns District History Society: see *Cook Shire burial register to 1920 and monumental inscriptions to 1986,* Cairns and District Family History Society, Cairns, 1989.

development.[117] As urban histories, however, they frequently lack the interpretative framework needed for understanding social change.[118]

The paradox is that the importance of social change within urban communities has often meant that the history of towns and cities has become a more important field of study for sociologists than for historians.[119] Yet many of the studies by sociologists — with their focus on the *problems* rather than the *processes* of urbanisation — are 'case' or 'impact' studies, with the city merely the location for the study's central concern and with the urban environment playing no dynamic part.[120]

Indeed, although some historians would argue that such studies are a legitimate form of urban history, the majority view would be that case or impact studies are more usually relevant to mainstream historical studies, given that the topics addressed should not be 'conveniently isolated as the pathology of modern city life'.[121] Certainly, it would seem that urban history should be about the study of urbanisation as a *process,* relating 'the configurations of individual communities to ongoing changes that have been reshaping society'.[122] A modern viewpoint is that

> urban history is not ... merely the sum of its constituent parts — cultural, physical, organisational and behavioural — but more accurately an analysis of their interaction in a unique spatial setting.[123]

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117 See, for example, C.N. Glaab and A.T. Brown, *A history of urban America,* Macmillan, New York, 1967, p. 60. They also 'form the basis for much of our specific knowledge of cities': L.H. Lees, 'The challenge of political change: urban history in the 1990s', *Urban History,* 21, 1, April 1994, p. 9.

118 See R. Lubove, 'The urbanisation process: an approach to historical research' in A.B. Callow (ed.), *American urban history,* Oxford University Press, New York, 1969, p. 643.

119 J.R. Laverty, *The urban revolution,* University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1978, p. 3.

120 See D. Fraser and A. Sutcliffe (eds.), *The pursuit of urban history,* Edward Arnold, London, 1983, Preface p. xxi.

121 E.E. Lampard, 'The dimensions of urban history: a footnote to the "urban crisis" ', *Pacific Historical Review,* 34, 3, August 1970, pp. 262-4 and Lubove, 'The urbanisation process', p. 642.

122 See E.E. Lampard, 'Urbanisation and social change: on broadening the scope and relevance of urban history' in O. Handlin and J. Burchard (eds), *The historian and the city,* MIT Press and Harvard University Press, Cambridge (US), 1963, p. 233.

123 R. Rodger, 'Urban history: prospect and retrospect' in *Urban History,* 19, 1, April 1992, p. 9.

On that basis, this study of Cooktown — which includes an analysis of the formation of a community, as well as the impact of new arrivals on community structure and organisation — should probably be seen as a detailed case study of the process of urban formation at the micro-level. At the same time, it is also a local history, in terms of Weston Bate's definition, in that it presents

> a general history of the locality ... [while demonstrating the extent to which] individuals fit a distinct pattern, which in turn forms part of a state or national pattern of events.[124]

A Window in Time

Obviously, in line with Bate's definition of a study encompassing 'a general history of the locality', there may be some who would argue that the timeframe of this study — 1873 to 1885 — both overlooks significant developments in later years and presents a very narrow perspective of the 'total' history of Cooktown. The counter-argument is that a comprehensive history of Cooktown from pre-1770 to the present day would normally be beyond any single scholar, or else the analysis would be extremely shallow.[125]

There may also be some who would argue that a generation of about twenty years is the optimum period over which to analyse the process of change within a community and that significant change is unlikely to have occurred in Cooktown within the twelve years between late 1873 and 1885.[126] The counter to that argument is that the 'rise and fall' of Cooktown was largely fixed at both ends of the time-frame in question by two events — the discovery of gold at the Palmer River in 1873 and the completion of the ill-fated railway line to Laura in 1885. Moreover, because Cooktown only began its existence in 1873, the process of change thereafter was almost exclusively influenced by events from that date onwards.

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124 W.A. Bate, 'Review article', *Historical Studies,* 14, 54, 1970, pp. 312-3.

125 See the discussion in H.J. Dyos, 'Agenda for urban histories' in H.J. Dyos (ed.), *The study of urban history,* Edward Arnold, London, 1968, pp. 6-9.

126 See, for example, P. Dawson, 'The community as an object of history', *Journal of Social History,* 6, 1972-73, pp. 344-58 arguing that the ideal community history shows changing relations over a long period of time.

Analysing the Community

One of the most significant changes in the scope of historical studies in the last two or three decades has been the shift of interest from the individual to the community.[127] In part, the shift has been due to the introduction of quantitative techniques, which have enabled historians to discover the 'common folk' — the vast majority of the population who have left no written records of their lives.[128] The difficulty in using this 'bottom-up' approach for a study of Cooktown, or indeed nineteenth century Australia in general, is the paucity of information on the poor and working classes, as well as the absence of census enumerator sources in Australia.[129]

There is, for example, very little detailed information available on the thousands of would-be miners who passed through Cooktown on their way to the goldfields. Even those who stayed in Cooktown, working as labourers or in semi-skilled positions, are rarely recorded by name. Similarly, the thousands of Chinese who flooded into Far North Queensland *via* Cooktown rate barely a mention as individuals. The small number of Chinese who became successful business-men and -women are occasionally mentioned in directories, newspapers and the registers of the Court of Petty Sessions. But females, children and Aborigines might well have not existed. The other consideration is that even when material on the poor and working classes is available, a 'bottom up' approach may be using information drawn from middle-class sources and reflecting middle-class bias, rather than the views of those actually being portrayed.

An alternative is a 'top down' approach concentrating on the wealthy and privileged of Cooktown society. One of the advantages of this

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127 See, for example, the discussion in J. Tosh, *The pursuit of history,* Longman, London, 1984, p. 78.

128 For a critique of this approach see P.N. Stearns, 'Towards a wider vision: trends in social history' in M. Kammen (ed.), *The past before us,* Cornell University Press, London, 1980, pp. 205-30. See also B. Bailyn, 'The challenge of modern historiography', *American Historical Review,* 87, 1982, pp. 2-4 and, T. Bender, 'Wholes and parts: the need for synthesis in American history', *Journal of American History,* 73, 1986, pp. 120-35.

129 It was the availability of census source materials in the United States which was largely responsible for the emergence of 'quantitative' history, notably by Stephan Thernstrom.

approach is that it would deal with the influential elements of the community — the decision makers and those who influenced decisions. Moreover, material on the elite is generally readily available in a variety of forms, across a broad spectrum of data. The obvious disadvantage of a 'top down' approach would be that it reflects an extremely narrow perspective and portrays only a limited 'slice' of the community. Moreover, the view of the elite would rarely have been the view of the broad masses of society.

Another approach would be the study of Cooktown through its institutions. This could involve analysing the role that institutions, such as the church, played in the development of the community. Other possibilities would be the primary school, the hospital, community or youth organisations, charitable institutions or the local government authority. The advantage of this approach is that it would encompass both the elite and the mass of society. The disadvantage would be that an institutional approach is limited in its perspective and could give undue influence to the role of the particular institution in the development of the community.

Yet another approach would be to concentrate on a particular minority group. This could be the study of a racial minority, such as the Aborigines, Chinese or Irish. Or it could concentrate on a thematic grouping, such as women, the poor, the homeless, the unemployed or a particular employment category. The advantage of this approach would be that it presents a perspective of the community usually quite different to that reflected in more traditional historical studies.[130] The obvious disadvantage would be that it results, by definition, in a view of the community which was treated, at least, as peripheral to that of mainstream society.

The conclusion to be drawn from this discussion would seem to be that no single approach is likely to provide a balanced perspective of the Cooktown community. The preferable option, it would seem, would be to utilise a combination of approaches, best able to ensure a comprehensive overview of early society in Cooktown, and to avoid the obvious extremes.

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130 Australian history has tended to be pre-occupied with decidedly male themes - mateship, nationalism, labour history etc: see M. Tucker, 'Women in Australian history', *Historical Studies,* 17, 1977, pp. 399-407.

The Presentation of Findings

Amateur historians have written some excellent accounts of local history in Queensland. The majority of community-based studies, though, have been written by academic historians, with most substantive works deriving from dissertations. The dilemma facing academic historians is how to present their analysis in a form that will appeal to a wider audience than simply other historians working in the same field.[131]

Problems of 'readability' are particularly evident in studies concentrating on theoretical approaches and those relying heavily on quantitative analysis. At the other end of the scale are light-weight narratives, often full of interesting anecdotes but lacking an analytical framework.[132] Moreover, while the narrative-type local histories may be read with interest by people with close links to the particular community in question, they usually have little appeal to a wider readership. The challenge, therefore, is how best

> to convey the complexity of a particular town ...
> [to] several layers of readership ... ranging from
> the academically elitist to the coffee table casual.[133]

One method is the use of **narrative** — providing a pen picture of a slice in time — and describing events and places as a contemporary and thoughtful observer would have described them.[134] Understandably, this form of presentation holds great appeal for lay readers (because its mode of cognition approximates the reality of everyday life), particularly when they are local residents.[135] Moreover, urban biographies not only provide 'the empirical bedrock for ... [more detailed] analyses' but

> enrich the historical awareness of urban communities
> ... [and stimulate] contemporary interest in the

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131 See Bailyn, 'The challenge of modern historiography', pp. 1-24 arguing that the challenge is how to put the story into a readable account of major developments.

132 Weston Bate in 'The good old cause in local history', *Historical Studies,* 11, 41, 1963, p. 120 refers to such studies as 'undigested reminiscences and lists of names'.

133 Rodger, 'Urban history', pp. 6-7.

134 This approach can also be termed 'retrospective ethnography': see C. Tilly, 'The old new social history and the new old social history', *Review,* 7, 1984, p. 380.

135 See J. Henretta, 'Social history as lived and written', *American Historical Review,* 84, 1979, p. 1319.

> heritage industry .. [by] deepening community awareness of local history and urban culture.[136]

Notwithstanding their evident value, the lack of analysis in narrative-type studies and their typical emphasis on the unique rather than the common elements in repetitive events often limits their usefulness. An alternative is the use of **quantitative methodology.** In this context, 'quantitative' relates to an approach based almost exclusively on the analytical interpretation of statistical data, supplemented by quantitative source materials, such as tables and figures.

Quantification is certainly a useful means of organising data in order to highlight the vital questions needing analysis but it does not, in itself, provide the answers.[137] Quantitative analysis does, however, make it possible to connect individual experience with large social processes more clearly than ever before.[138] There is, of course, a real danger of quantitative historians 'failing to see the woods for the trees' and of becoming so engrossed in a maze of details that their findings become meaningless (and immensely boring) to the non-specialist reader.

Another concern is that quantification encourages the notion that the basic components of social life are objective and statistically verifiable, and that analyses of social structure can be restricted to their objective determinants, reduced or derived from material facts and processes.[139] But statistics alone, of course, cannot recreate the ambience and atmosphere of people and places from the past. Nor can quantitative analysis interpret the mass of data available — that task remains the *raison d'être* of the modern historian.

The preferred option, therefore, seems to be a balanced combination of narrative and quantitative methodology. A narrative or descriptive prose could be used to illustrate the interpretative

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136 Rodger, 'Urban history', pp. 7-8. Lees similarly contends 'a healthy scepticism about generalisations not anchored in detailed studies': Lees, 'The challenge of political change', p. 10.

137 Stearns, *The past before us,* p. 227.

138 Tilly, 'The old new social history', p. 394.

139 See L. Stone, 'History and the social sciences in the twentieth century' in C.F. Delzell (ed.), *The future of History,* Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville, 1977, pp. 1-42.

generalisations derived from quantitative analysis and to evoke a spirit of place and a feeling for the identity of the community.

The Structure of the Study

One of the fundamental issues in deciding how best to structure any study is whether to adopt a chronological or thematic approach. Intuitively, it would seem that histories spanning a half century or more are best handled chronologically, while studies over one of two decades suit a thematic approach. A brief perusal of a number of recent Australian local history publications suggests that there is no hard and fast rule and that the choice very much depends on the subject (and the author).

The two basic options, therefore, appear to be a chronological structure, with themes dealt with on a chapter-by-chapter basis, or a thematic structure, with the themes developed separately and chronologically. The problem with the first option is theme continuity; the problem with the second is the relationship between the themes.

For this study, either option would seem workable. Given, however, the need to address in more detail the traditional interpretations discussed earlier in the chapter, it seems sensible to structure the study along similarly thematic lines, culminating in a discussion of the central theme and associated issues. In outline, therefore, the study consists of an introductory and concluding chapter (each of around 10,000 words) and six main chapters, based thematically around the traditional interpretations (each of around 12,500 words).

Chapter 1 The Study of a Frontier Town obviously introduces the study and its central theme, discusses previous research on the subject, outlines the traditional interpretations, identifies the available sources, discusses certain methodological issues of approach and structure, and places the study in its historigraphical context.

Chapter 2 An Uncertain Beginning deals primarily with the tenuous *raison d'être* of Cooktown as a frontier mining town. It also provides a brief description of the physical and geographic features of the region, as well as 'setting the scene' historically for the remaining chapters.

Chapter 3 The Coming of the White Man addresses the issue of early race relations, primarily between Europeans and Aborigines. It refutes some of the more fanciful accounts of early race relations, including those relating to the cannibalism of Chinese and the alleged violation of white women by Aborigines. More importantly, it addresses the underlying reasons for Aboriginal resistance to 'the coming of the white man'.

Chapter 4 Tent City to Town deals with the process of small town urbanisation, including the development of Cooktown's business community and the commercial nexus between the town and the Palmer River goldfields. It also discusses the largely unrecorded part played by Cooktown's Chinese community in its transformation from tent city to town.

Chapter 5 A Frontier Community is about the social formation of the Cooktown community. It addresses the composition, origins and aspirations of Cooktown's early settlers and their subsequent social and occupational mobility, as well as the extent of civic involvement.

Chapter 6 Small Town in a Large Colony examines the role of Cooktown, as a frontier mining town, in the wider development of Queensland. It addresses the economic importance of Cooktown, the development of local government, the town's economic links to its hinterland and the rest of Queensland, and the town's success or otherwise in attracting an equitable share of government expenditure.

Chapter 7 Boom to Bust traces the shifting focus of Cooktown's business and civic leaders through the mid 1870s to the early 1880s. It addresses the important issue of Chinese immigration, and the attempts made to diversify the Cooktown economy.

Chapter 8 Conclusions draws together the strands of the study and details the extent to which Cooktown fits the current and traditional interpretations of national, Queensland and regional history. It also identifies a number of additional interpretations which might have wider significance elsewhere. Finally, it summarises the issues relating to the demise of Cooktown in the late 1870s and draws a number of conclusions on the central theme of this study.

The Study in its Historiographical Context

Whether this study is an urban, social or local history it was addressed earlier under 'An Approach to the Study'. The concluding point made in that discussion was that any analysis of the general history of a locality needs also to take account of the wider regional, state or national pattern of events. That reflects the prevailing view in Australian historiography that urban and regional history should not be regarded as two separate sub-disciplines but that

> [t]he history of a city may best be understood if it is studied within the context of its hinterland and region.[140]

A common criticism of many single-town studies in the 1960s and 1970s has been that while they well demonstrated the variety and complexity of urban development, they seemingly failed to appreciate that the growth of a country town is largely determined by the size and nature of its rural hinterland and by its competitive relationship with other urban centres.[141] S. Priestley's studies of *Echuca* (1965) and *Warracknabeal* (1967), for example, were good single-town studies, but were basically 'urban biographies',[142] Similarly, studies such as Buxton's *The Riverina 1861-1891* (1967) and Walker's *Old England Town* (1966) provided comprehensive coverage of the towns, but tended to overlook the critical relationship between the town and its hinterland.

A second view, not exclusive of the first, is that historians should consider a comparative social morphology of Australian cities and towns, developing a model of towns grouped on the basis of their main industries and with further sub-divisions defined by characteristics within the group;

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140 See J.R. Laverty, 'The study of city and regional history in Australia', *Australian Journal of Politics and History,* 41, Special Issue, 1995, p. 111.

141 See J.W. McCarty, 'Australian regional history', *Historical Studies,* 18, 70, 1978-79, p. 102.

142 They do, of course, provide most useful secondary source material for regional historians.

mining towns, for example, could be one 'group', sub-divided into gold towns, base metal or coal towns and so on.[143]

According to McCarty, such a morphology would then enable comparative studies to be conducted, for example, of Ballarat, Broken Hill, Mt Lyell and Newcastle, each of which has already been the subject of a local history study.[144] His concern is that unless local and regional historians progressively adapt their historiography to this sort of approach, a continuing replication of urban biographies will lead to a situation of diminishing returns and eventual stagnation.[145]

The past several years have also seen some move back towards what could be termed 'popular' histories. In part, the move has reflected a rejection by the reading public of histories which have become too academic. The incoming president of the American Historical Association in 1990, for example, noted in his introductory address that

> history ... [has] lost much of its audience and much of its touch with common human experience by going academic ... and divorcing itself from the everyday realities that history is supposed to explain.[146]

In part also, the demand for 'popular' histories is a reflection of the resurgence of interest by the wider community in heritage issues and a growing public awareness and interest generally in the past.[147] Alan Atkinson's study of *Camden* (1988), for example, while certainly no light-weight popular history, capitalised on the longstanding public interest in the history of early New South Wales and the exploits of John Macarthur and his family.[148] The Australian bi-centenary celebrations of 1988 similarly stimulated considerable public interest in the formative years of

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143 J.W. McCarty, 'Melbourne, Ballarat, Sydney, Perth: the new city histories', *Historical Studies,* 19, 74, April 1980, pp. 13-4. The relationship between mining towns is addressed, for example, by J.R. Laverty 'Urban development' in W.H. Richmond and P.C. Sharma (eds.), *Mining and Australia,* University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1983, pp. 119-49.

144 McCarty, 'Melbourne, Ballarat etc', pp. 13-4.

145 A similar point on the need to undertake synthesis on some of the work already done is made by Bender, 'Wholes and parts', pp. 120-36.

146 L.R. Harlan, 'The future of the American Historical Association' in *American Historical Review,* 95, 1, February 1990, p. 2.

147 See, for example, Rodger, 'Urban history', pp. 7-8.

148 A. Atkinson, *Camden,* Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1988.

the country. Moreover, that interest seems likely to intensify in the years ahead, especially in the lead-up to the centenary anniversary of federation and with the increasing political and public debate over the issue of Australian republicanism.

The Place of this Study

Obviously, it is not being suggested that this study will make any major impact on Australian historiography, given that its approach and methodology represent only evolutionary advances. Indeed, its focus on a small Queensland town, in a temporal setting 120 years ago, should superficially consign it to relative obscurity.

The attempt has been made, however, to present the study in a style which will make it of interest, in due course, to more people than just the present residents of Cooktown or those with a direct interest in its past. Moreover, by analysing the history of the demise of early Cooktown in the context of its relationship with the Palmer, and against a number of current and traditional interpretations of regional and Queensland history, the study will hopefully attract the attention of a wider readership than just those interested in Far North Queensland.

It is also hoped that the study's use of quantitative analysis will provide some benchmarks which may prove useful not only in better understanding certain of the traditional interpretations, but also in facilitating comparative analyses with mining towns elsewhere in Queensland and Australia. In summary, the study has been researched and written bearing in mind that

> the challenge for historians is to make explicit the links that they see between macro- and micro-levels of analysis.[149]

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149 Lees, 'The challenge of political change', p. 13.

CHAPTER 2 - AN UNCERTAIN BEGINNING

Cooktown has the probably unique distinction for an Australian town of being established at a site which visitor after early visitor rejected as unsuitable for white settlement. Its first recorded white visitor, Captain James Cook, noted in his journal on 19 June 1770 that

> the adjacent country ... afforded but a very indifferent prospect [with] the Low lands near the River all over run with Mangroves ... and the high land ... barren and Stoney.[1]

Almost a century later, John Jardine (then police magistrate at Somerset) reported to the Colonial Secretary, in response to instructions to investigate the suitability of the Endeavour River for a township, that lack of fresh water would pose serious hardship to any settlement.[2] In 1872, William Hann, leader of a government-sponsored exploration party reported to Parliament that

> the Endeavour does not hold out prospects for settlement ... there is nothing on it but its beauty ... that would induce anyone to come.[3]

Given such adverse reports, it is hardly surprising that Cooktown's *raison d'être* had little to do with the suitability of its site for settlement, or of the immediate region to sustain a township. Indeed, Cooktown (or Cook's Town as it was first known) was established at a landing on the Endeavour River on 25 October 1873, by a party of government officials, primarily for the purpose of providing resupply access from the coast to the newly-discovered Palmer River goldfields, largely *via* the route marked out by William Hann and his party in September/October 1872.[4]

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1 A.W. Reed ed., *Captain Cook in Australia,* Reed, Sydney, 1969, pp. 85-6.

2 John Jardine to Colonial Secretary, 10 October 1865, in-letter 3221 of 1865, COL/A73, Queensland State Archives (QSA).

3 Report from Mr W. Hann, Leader of the Northern Exploration Party, 20 December 1872 in *Votes and proceedings of the Legislative Assembly of Queensland [QVP],* 1873, p. 1057; Hann was mistakenly describing the Annan River estuary, eight kilometres south of the Endeavour.

4 Had the settlement been established in reverse order, that is, by a party from the Palmer retracing Hann's route to the coast, it is possible that Cooktown could have been established on the Annan River, rather than on the Endeavour River.

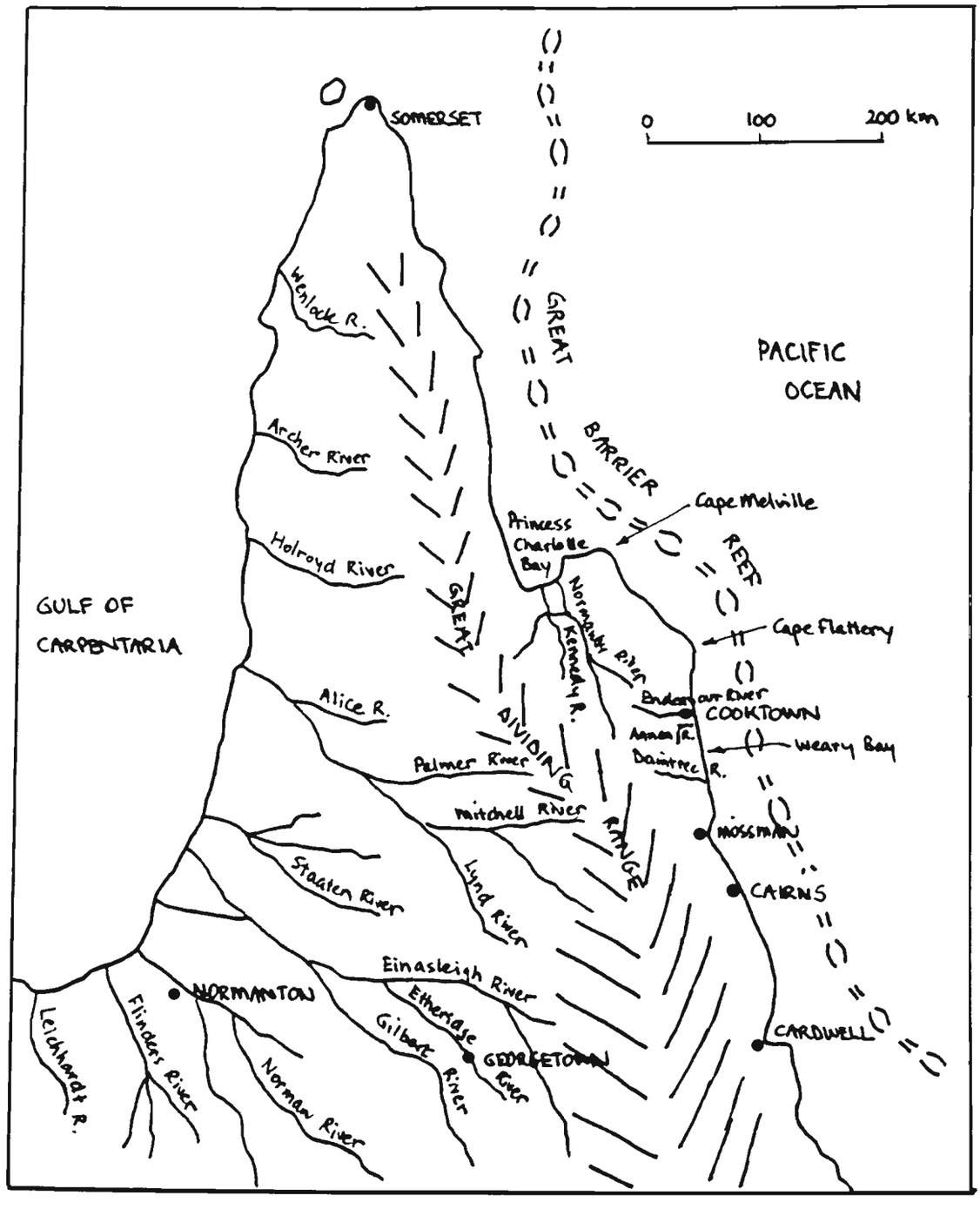
That *raison d'être* resulted in a precarious early existence for the fledgling settlement, as monsoonal rains cut the road link between Cooktown and the Palmer from mid-February to mid-March 1874 and as vested interests pressured the Government to consider alternative points of access to the Palmer, including Weary Bay (some forty kilometres south of Cooktown), Cardwell, Cairns and Townsville. Those issues, as well as a brief discussion of Cooktown in its geophysical and historical contexts, are the subject of this chapter.

Significantly, though, Cooktown's economic and communications linkages to the Palmer River goldfields also meant that the town's long-term viability, in the absence of alternative linkages or local developments, was heavily dependent upon the continuing economic viability of the Palmer. Later chapters examine the extent to which civic and business leaders in Cooktown accordingly 'talked up' the prospects of both the Palmer and Cooktown, and the point at which both effectively slid into decline.

The Geography of the Region

Cooktown lies on the eastern coast of Far North Queensland, some 600 kilometres from the northernmost tip of Cape York Peninsula (see Map 2.1 on page 46). It is 170 kilometres north of Cairns (as the crow flies) and some 1600 kilometres north of Brisbane — which is slightly further than the distance by air from Brisbane to Melbourne. By sea or air, it is 700 kilometres from Cooktown to Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea.

Map 2.1 - Far North Queensland



The major geographic feature of the region is the Great Dividing Range, which roughly parallels the eastern coast from Cairns in the south to Somerset in the north. The Range rises to over 1500 metres in the Bellenden Ker Range, south of Cairns, dropping to around 1000 metres west of Cooktown and then gradually falling away to the north. Offshore, the Great Barrier Reef similarly parallels the eastern coast. It is rarely more than fifty kilometres offshore between Cairns and Cape Melville, and presents a considerable obstacle and threat to coastal shipping.[5]

To the west of the Great Dividing Range, a series of river systems drain into the Gulf of Carpentaria. Notable are the Gilbert and Einasleigh, the Staaten (or Staten) and the Mitchell and Palmer. Their combined run-off into the Gulf in the wet season is reputedly equal to that of all the other rivers in Australia combined. In the wet season, creeks in the upper reaches are frequently transformed into raging, impassable torrents while on the coastal plains, rivers spread for tens of kilometres, inundating vast expanses of the peninsula.

To the east of the Great Dividing Range are generally a series of narrow, often fertile, coastal plains. The exception is the area between Mossman and Princess Charlotte Bay to the north. That area, which includes Cooktown, consists of a series of rugged coastal ranges, interspersed about the extensive reaches of the Kennedy and Normanby Rivers (which drain into Princess Charlotte Bay) and the lesser coastal rivers, which include the Endeavour, Annan and Daintree. Early explorers through the area were often limited by the rugged terrain to under ten kilometres of progress per day. William Hann, for example, covered some sixty-five kilometres in five days while following the watercourse of Oakey Creek towards the coast; but from there to the south, towards Weary Bay, he managed only twenty kilometres in six days.[6]

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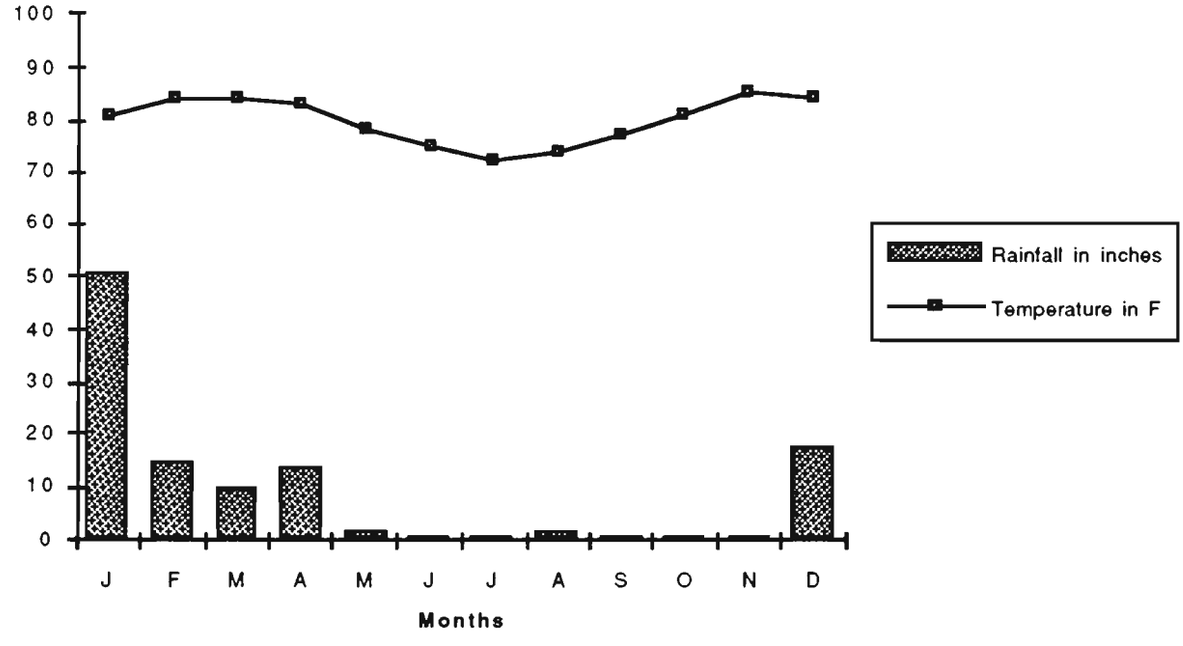
5 Captain Cook's ship HM Bark *Endeavour* ran aground on the later-named Endeavour Reef, some sixty kilometres southeast of Cooktown: see Reed, *Captain Cook,* p. 80.

6 Details taken from Map Sheet No. 1 of Hann, 'Report ...', pp. 1031-74.

The Climate of the Region

The climate along the eastern coastal fringe of Far North Queensland is hot and wet in summer (November to April) and mild and dry in winter (May to October).[7] Mean daily summer temperatures in Cooktown range between a minimum of 24°C and a maximum of 31°C in January, with winter mean temperatures in July generally between a minimum of 15°C and a maximum of 25°C.[8] Temperatures further inland are generally several degrees hotter by day and correspondingly cooler by night. On the Palmer River, for example, mean winter temperatures range from 10°C to 30°C, with mean summer temperatures from 20°C to 40°C. The actual mean monthly temperature readings for Cooktown for 1880 are shown at Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1 - Mean Temperature and Rainfall Readings: Cooktown 1880



Sources: *Votes and proceedings of the Legislative Assembly of Queensland* [*QVP*], 2, 1881, p. 1154.

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7 The ability or otherwise of the early white residents in Cooktown to cope with the northern climate is discussed in Chapter 5 'A Frontier Community'.

8 Data taken from Bureau of Meterology, *Climatic averages: Queensland,* Australian Government Publishing Service (AGPS), Canberra, 1975.

As can be seen from Figure 2.1 (at page 48), the summer wet season often produces extremely high rainfall in Cooktown around January. The dry season, by contrast, is often marked by almost drought conditions from May to November. Around the coastal ranges slightly further inland, the average annual rainfall is even higher. West of the Great Dividing Range, however, the mean annual rainfall recedes in rough inverse proportion to the distance from the Pacific coast. The entire Far North Queensland coastline is also vulnerable to tropical cyclones, with the Cooktown area statistically liable to cyclonic winds and torrential rain approximately once every two years.[9]

The Vegetation and Physical Environment of the Region

Early reports of the vegetation and physical environment of Far North Queensland often presented quite contradictory views. To an extent, those views reflected the diversities which exist between the wet and dry seasons, and between the dense, rugged mountains of the Great Dividing Range and the inundated featureless swamps of the coastal plains. Contradictions also existed between the favourable reports of marine geographers, who saw the land from the security of their ship, and the reports of those who physically confronted the elements of the environment.[10]

The reports also reflected the striking contrasts which often existed in vegetation and terrain over a relatively short distance, regardless of season. The Jardine brothers, for example, en route to Somerset along the western coast of the peninsula, advanced from 'an excellent camp with plenty of green grass, open country and water' on 15 December 1864 to 'a wretched country ... [with] no water' a week later.[11] Even more pronounced was the description of country near the Hodgkinson and Mitchell Rivers as observed by the prospector James Mulligan — one day 'the country here is of the poorest description', while on the next 'a most beautiful creek with the richest banks possible, magnificently grassed'.[12]

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9 Bureau of Meterology, *Climatic survey, Northern Region 16 - Queensland,* AGPS, Canberra, 1971, p. 62.

10 See, for example, Dalrymple's exotic description of the tropical jungle, viewed from the sea on 6 December 1873 in G.E. Dalrymple, 'Narrative and Reports of the Queensland North-East Coast Expedition 1873', *QVP,* 2, 1874, p. 643.

11 F.J. Byerley ed., *Narrative of the overland expedition of the Messrs Jardine,* Buxton, Brisbane, 1867, pp. 34 and 38.

12 J.V. Mulligan, 'Expedition in Search of Gold and Other Minerals in the Palmer Districts by Mulligan and Party', *QVP,* 1, 1876, pp. 3-4.

Nearer to Cooktown, early reports on the countryside were similarly contradictory. James Cook, in a journal entry amplifying his first impressions, described the country as

> diversified with Hills and plains, and these with woods and Lawns; the Soil of the Hills is hard, dry and very Stoney .... in general the Land is pretty well Cloathed with long grass, wood, Shrubs etc ... but few sorts of Trees.[13]

G.E. Dalrymple, leader of the government-sponsored northeast coast expedition of late 1873, described the country fifteen kilometres inland of Cooktown as 'a great primeval sandy desert plain dotted with coarse grasses and stunted dirty green open forest'.[14] A.C. Macmillan, however, co-leader of the government party sent to establish a road to the Palmer, described the same land between the coast and the ranges as consisting 'of ironstone and quartz ridges, timbered with stunted ironbark, bloodwood and teatree saplings, while the flats are poorly grassed'.[15] Clearly, descriptions of the physical environment, like beauty, are often in the eye of the beholder!

It is clear also, however, that a more useful assessment by early visitors would have been to couch their descriptions in terms of the land's potential for agricultural or pastoral development. That then would have tempered some of the more optimistic predictions for Cooktown which appeared not infrequently in southern newspapers. *The Brisbane Courier,* for example, in an article on 'The Future City on the Endeavour', dated 24 January 1874, spoke glowingly of 'farmers on the valuable land ... especially sugar planters ... [who] will doubtless sell or ship their produce and obtain their stores' *via* Cooktown.[16] In the event, neither agriculture nor sugar-cane farming ever became viable industries in the Cooktown area (although sugar-cane was grown south from the Annan River).

The Site of Cooktown

The present site of Cooktown, selected by A.C. Macmillan on

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13 Reed, *Captain Cook,* p. 104.

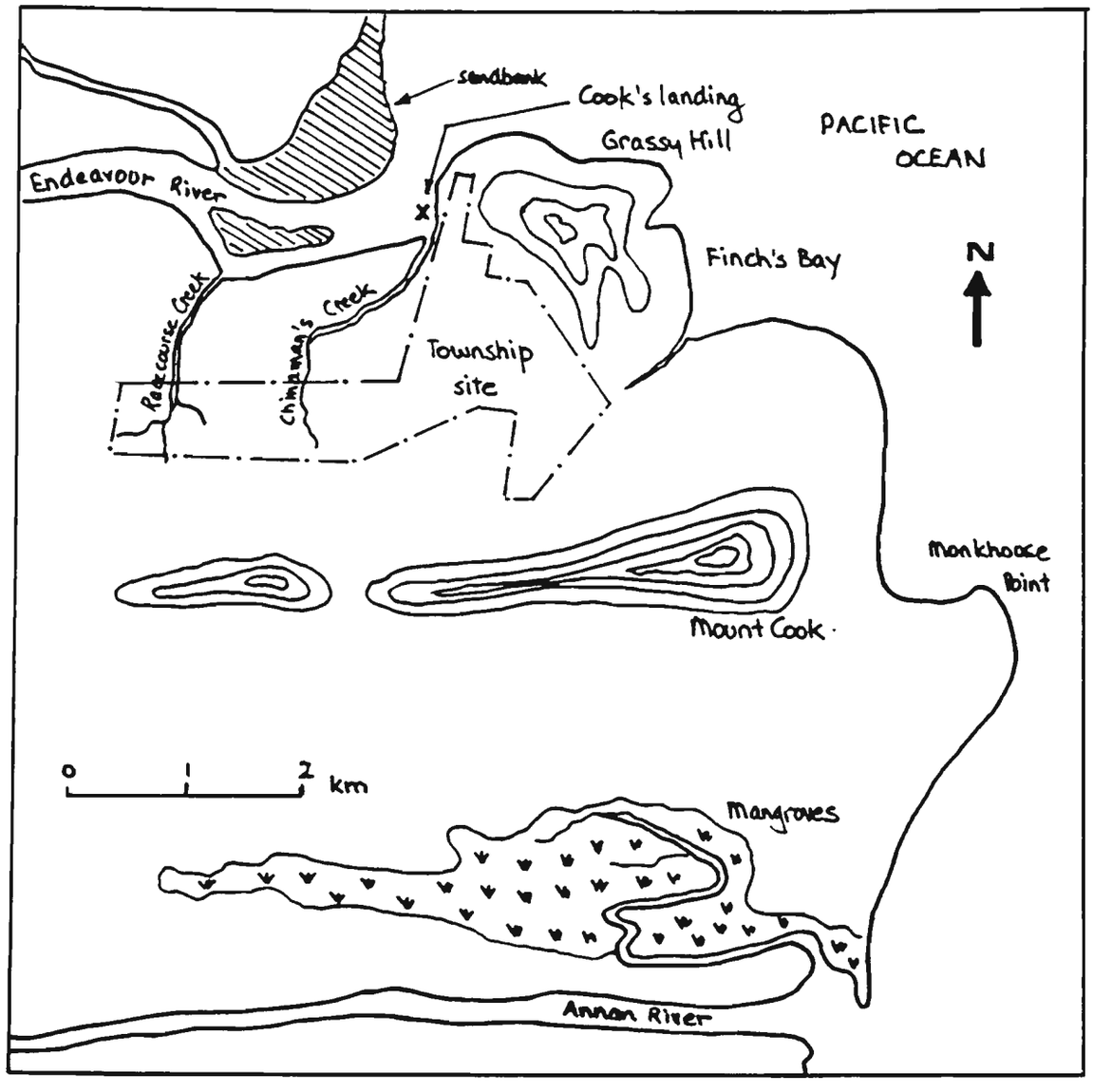
14 Dalrymple, 'Narrative ...', p. 635.

15 A.C. Macmillan to Secretary for Works, 30 October 1873, in-letter 4598 of 1873, WOR/A74,QSA.

16 *The Brisbane Courier,* 24 January 1874, p. 6.

28 October 1873, lies on the southern bank of the Endeavour River some 500 metres from the ocean[17] (see Map 2.2). Between it and the ocean is Grassy Hill, a 150 metre-high grass covered knoll which also forms the southern promontory of the estuary.[18] On the seaward side, Grassy Hill slopes abruptly to the water with a steep bank of large boulders washed by the tide.

Map 2.2 - The Site of Cooktown and its Environs



17 Selection of the site by Macmillan is discussed later in this chapter.

18 D.J. Farnfield contends that Cook named Grassy Hill: see 'George Elphinstone Dalrymple - His Life and Times in Queensland 1859-74', PhD thesis, University of Queensland, 1968, p. 302. But Cook makes no mention of naming it in his journal, other than referring to it as 'the hill ... near the South point': Reed, *Captain Cook,* p. 91. Neither do A.C. Macmillan and Howard St George refer to it as Grassy Hill in their respective reports to Brisbane on 30 October 1873. It seems possible, therefore, that its name came about through common usage during the few days before Dalrymple departed the Endeavour River on 31 October.

Towards the river, the hill slopes down steeply but then levels out for about 100 metres before the water's edge. The bank, composed mainly of large boulders, is about one metre above sea level at high tide, forming a natural wharf for about 500 metres.

To the south of Grassy Hill, the land is generally flat to the foothills of Mount Cook, some two kilometres to the south.[19] To the southwest of Grassy Hill, the bouldered river bank gradually gives way to mud flats and mangroves, through which meanders a narrow creek, now named Chinaman's Creek. Depending upon the time of year and local rainfall, spring water can be found on the southern slopes of Grassy Hill and in the foothills of Mount Cook.

The Original Inhabitants

Prior to the destruction of the traditional Aboriginal society around the Endeavour River, as will be discussed in Chapter 3, it is possible that the area sustained an Aboriginal population of around 250-300 people, comprising elements of two coastal and at least one hinterland tribal groups.[20] South of the river, covering an area of about 800 square kilometres, was the tribal land of the Koko-Bujundi, extending south along the coast for some forty kilometres and inland some twenty kilometres.[21] North of the river was the tribal land of the Koko-Imudji, extending from the Endeavour River some fifty kilometres northwards almost to Cape Flattery. Between the coast and the Palmer River were the tribal lands of at least

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19 Mount Cook was named by Lieutenant Phillip King in 1819 after Captain James Cook. Although unnamed in Cook's journal, the sketch on 14 June 1770 suggests that Cook had previously named this feature Gores Mount, after one of his officers: see Reed, *Captain Cook,* p. 84.

20 See N.B. Tindale, *Aboriginal tribes of Australia,* ANU Press, Canberra, 1974, p. 176. The estimation of numbers is derived from the work of B.F. Craig, *Cape York: occasional papers in Aboriginal studies Number 9,* Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1967, Map Y which shows a total of 135 tribal groups in Far North Queensland, and Professor A.P. Elkin's assessment that there were 40,000 Aborigines between Cape York Peninsula and the Gilbert River: see in N.A. Loos, 'Aboriginal-European relations in North Queensland 1861-97', PhD thesis, James Cook University, 1976, p. 15. In broad terms, those figures suggest a population per tribal group of around 250-300 persons, although given the size of the tribal areas involved, probably only about one-third of each group would likely have been in the Endeavour River at any one time.

21 But see that K. Pope, 'An examination of the material culture of SE Cape York Peninsula based on the Roth Ethnographical Collection at the Australian Museum, Sydney', Diploma of Anthropology thesis, Sydney University, 1967, p. 17 shows the tribe as Djulngai, with the Bujundi being further inland. Tindale, *Aboriginal tribes,* p.176 also lists several different names.

another five Aboriginal groups, probably comprising some 1250-1500 people in total.[22]

Contrary to the views of early white explorers and settlers, the Aborigines not only had clearly-defined tribal areas but their movement within such areas was purposeful and dictated by the seasonal availability of food, as well as social and ceremonial demands.[23] Captain Cook, for example, saw only twenty-one Aborigines south of the Endeavour River during his forty-eight day stay, most likely part of two or three family groups. Because his visit occurred during the height of the dry season, the remainder of the group had probably moved earlier to the more fertile foothills. In the eyes of most early whites, however, the Aborigines were stone-age hunters who 'wandered as their forefathers had wandered' and possessed no claim or legitimate interest in the land.[24]

The First White Visitors

According to Cook's journal, the first sighting of Aborigines by the ship's crew occurred on 10 July 1770, some twenty-three days after their arrival at Endeavour River.[25] Cook, though, was understandably pre-occupied with the repairs to his ship and seems to have overlooked the report from Banks (who spent much of his time ashore) that a small party from the ship had unexpectedly come across several Aborigines on 5 July.[26] Indeed, Banks reported that the first 'outsider' seen by the Aborigines at close quarters was the Tahitian passenger Tupia, who happened to be at the front of the group at the time.[27]

The cautious but somewhat indifferent reaction by the Aborigines seems to suggest that Cook and his party were not the first visitors to that

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22 See Pope, 'An examination ...', p. Miii.

23 See, for example, D.J. Mulvaney, *The pre-history of Australia,* Thames and Hudson, London, 1969, pp. 12 and 57.

24 See, for example, C.D. Cotton, *Ludwig Leichhardt and the Great South Land,* Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1938, p. 140.

25 Reed, *Captain Cook,* p. 94.

26 See F.P. Woolston, 'The Gogo-Yimidir People and The Endeavour' in *Queensland Heritage,* 2, 2, May 1970, p. 13.

27 Woolston, 'The Gogo-Yimidir People ...', p. 13.

part of the coast. Doubtless, the Aborigines would have been observing the ship since its arrival three weeks previously.[28] Nevertheless, their willingness to approach the ship, albeit with some caution, and subsequently accept gifts from the crew, suggests an appreciation — based on experience — that Cook's men were transients, and not necessarily a threat to their well-being.

Later explorers, particularly those inland, reported quite different and often quite dramatic reactions by Aborigines to their first sight of Europeans. Many of the natives were absolutely terrified, often shaking uncontrollably with visible fear. Many seemed to believe that white men were the reincarnations of departed relatives or tribal enemies.[29] In other cases, reactions were more subdued and seemed influenced by reports of contact communicated between Aboriginal groups.

On 31 December 1844, for example, Ludwig Leichhardt's party happened upon a group of Aborigines, one of whom uttered a cry resembling the words 'white-fella, white-fella' and ran off, followed by the whole party.[30] One can perhaps assume that this individual's recollection of contact with Europeans was not pleasant. In contrast, Leichhardt's party met a group on 22 October 1845 who were very friendly and who, having been presented with horse-nails, asked Leichhardt to bend them into fish-hooks.[31] Leichhardt noted that they had doubtless seen or heard of white people before, and it was evident that such contacts or reports of contact were favourable.[32]

Other early explorers were equally impressed with the speed and spread of Aboriginal communications. During Sturt's journey towards the Murray in 1830, for example, the Aborigines regularly sent 'ambassadors' forward and the party was literally handed from local group to local group.[33] Leichhardt reported a similar system in North Queensland, with

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28 Cook noted that on 29 June, and again on 3 July, shore parties came across hastily-deserted native encampments, with campfires still burning, suggesting that the activities of his men were being closely watched: Reed, *Captain Cook,* pp. 39 and 92.

29 See G. Blainey, *A land half won,* Macmillan, Melbourne, 1980, pp. 66-7.

30 L. Leichhardt, *Journal of an overland expedition in Australia,* Boone, London, 1847, p. 90.

31 Leichhardt, *Journal of an overland expedition,* pp. 446-7.

32 Leichhardt, *Journal of an overland expedition,* p. 447.

33 See H. Reynolds, 'The land, the explorers and the Aborigines' in *Historical Studies,* 19, 75, 1980, pp. 214-6.

messengers being sent forward to inform other groups of the progress of his party.[34]

This is not to suggest that a series of Aboriginal messengers relayed the news of Cook's progress northwards along the east coast of Australia. Rather, it seems probable that the local Aborigines knew of such seaborne outsiders from reports of Malay fishermen and traders visiting the Gulf of Carpentaria, from as early as the sixteenth century and of the four Dutch expeditions which probed the western shores of Cape York Peninsula between 1606 and 1756.[35]

The Dutch, in particular, with their instructions to kidnap Aborigines so that the authorities (and the Dutch East India Company) could learn more about the country from them, would certainly have been a subject worthy of communication.[36]

The Arrival of Captain Cook

Captain Cook's first view of the Endeavour River and the landing which ultimately took his name occurred on 14 June 1770.[37] For most of his stay, Cook was engrossed in repairing the damage to his ship, and his journal entries were dominated either by the progress of repairs, reprovisioning the ship or reports of seaward reconnaissance (seeking a channel back out through the surrounding reefs). Indeed, his entry on 19 June of the adjacent land affording 'a very indifferent prospect' is the only descriptive entry of the countryside for the whole of his time in harbour, apart from the sketch (see Plate 2.1 at page 56) appearing in his journal on 18 June.

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34 Leichhardt, *Journal of an overland expedition,* p. 349.

35 For a fuller account of the Dutch activities see N. Loos, 'A Chapter of Contact: Aboriginal-European Relations in North Queensland, 1606-1992' in H. Reynolds (ed.), *Race relations in North Queensland,* James Cook University, Townsville, 1993, p. 5.

36 Loos, 'A Chapter of Contact ...', p. 5.

37 Although the *Endeavour* was not taken into the river until 17 June, Cook reconnoitered the harbour by small boat on 14 June: Reed, *Captain Cook,* pp. 84-5.

Plate 2.1 Sketch of the Endeavour River from the Journal of Captain James Cook

Source: A.W. Reed ed., *Captain Cook in Australia*, Reed, Sydney, 1969, p. 85.

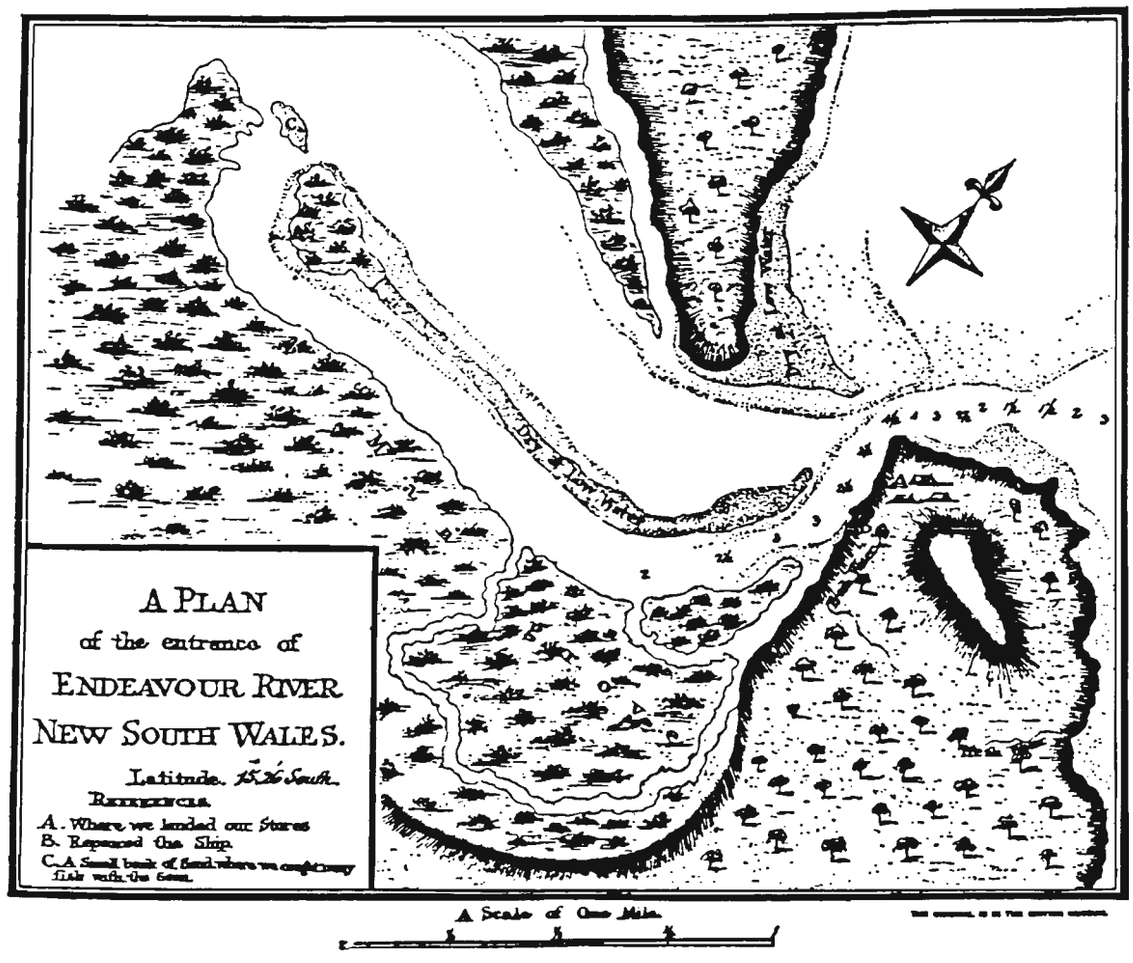
Once safely to sea on 4 August, Cook devoted several pages to 'a Short description of the Harbour, or River, we have been in, which I named after the Ship, Endeavour River'.[38] Included with it is a plan of the river and foreshore (see Plate 2.2 at page 57). Most of his descriptive comments, however, related either to the river or the fauna observed ashore (including the *Kangaru*), with passing reference to the fact that 'we were very well supply'd with water by springs which were not far off'.[39] The underlying impression from Cook's journal entries for the period is that he was generally unimpressed with the area of his enforced landing and was glad to be away from it.[40]

38 Reed, *Captain Cook*, p. 102.

39 Reed, *Captain Cook*, pp. 104-5.

40 Even the Endeavour River, which a later commentator asserted was the finest port north of Sydney, Cook described as 'convenient for heaving a Ship down [but] ... this is all the River hath to recommend it': Reed, *Captain Cook*, p. 102.

Plate 2.2 Sketch of the Endeavour River and Environs from the Journal of Captain James Cook



Source: A.W. Reed ed., *Captain Cook in Australia*, Reed, Sydney, 1969, p. 90.

Further Maritime Visitors

The second recorded visit of whites to the Endeavour River occurred in late June 1819, with the arrival of HM Cutter *Mermaid*, under the command of Lieutenant Phillip King. King, the son of New South Wales' Governor Philip Gidley King, had been commissioned to survey the northeastern coastline and called at the Endeavour River from 28 June to 12 July 1819 and again on his return journey on 27 July 1819. The most notable aspect of his visits was a clash with a group of Aborigines on 2 July, when spears were thrown and shots fired after several Aborigines took 'a violent fancy' to clothes being washed on shore by the sailors.[41]

41 For an account of the incident, albeit from a 'white' perspective, see R.L. Jack, *Northmost Australia*, Vol. 1, Robertson, Melbourne, 1922, p. 149.

The next recorded visit was some forty-five years later by John Jardine in late September 1865. As discussed earlier, Jardine had been instructed by the Colonial Secretary to investigate the Endeavour River, in his capacity as police magistrate and official government resident at Somerset (on the tip of Cape York Peninsula), to determine its suitability for settlement. Being at the height of the dry season, Jardine's inability to find an ample supply of fresh water is hardly surprising, although it seems he may not have located the more plentiful source in the foothills of Mount Cook (which had been reported by Captain Cook's party).[42] That source was found to provide 'an abundant supply of spring water', even in late October, as reported by A.C. Macmillan some eight years later.[43]

Although not recorded, it also seems almost certain that the Endeavour River landing would have been visited on a number of occasions throughout the 1850s and 1860s by whites involved in the *bêche-de-mer* industry and possibly, in the late 1860s, by timber cutters. *Bêche-de-mer* stations, run by Europeans, were operating along the far north coast in the 1860s, using 'kanaka' (and probably 'pressed' Aboriginal) labour.[44] Dalrymple, for example, after visiting the fledgling settlement at Cooktown, put in at Three Isles (thirty-five kilometres north-east of Cooktown) on 31 October 1873 to collect twenty tons of *bêche-de-mer* from the fishing station there.[45] It would not be surprising if the operators of *bêche-de-mer* stations in the 1860s (and possibly as early as the late 1850s) had already been attempting to 'recruit' Aboriginal workers from along the coast near Cooktown, *via* the Endeavour River landing.[46]

It is also possible that timber cutters, operating from Cardwell, could have visited the Endeavour River landing in the late 1860s or early 1870s. Prolific stands of cedar were 'harvested' along the coast between Cardwell and Cooktown in the early 1870s — a party led by one O'Grady for

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42 John Jardine to Colonial Secretary, 10 October 1865, in-letter 3221 of 1865, COL/A73, QSA.

43 A.C. Macmillan to Secretary for Works, 30 October 1873, in-letter 4578 of 1873, WOR/A74,QSA.

44 See N.A. Loos, *Invasion and resistance,* ANU Press, Canberra, 1982, pp. 118-59 (Chapter 5 'The Sea Frontier').

45 Dalrymple, 'Narrative ...', p. 636.

46 The exploitation of Aborigines in the *bêche-de-mer* industry is discussed more fully in Chapter 3.

example, felled over 700,000 feet of timber between July and September 1874.[47] Still, no mention of that activity appears in the journal of Dalrymple's expedition, which explored the coast from Cardwell to Cooktown in late 1873. So cedar-cutters may perhaps have been reconnoitering, but not necessarily harvesting timber, as far north as Cooktown prior to the establishment of the settlement.[48]

There are also two reports from 1872 and 1873 of the earlier presence of European fishermen at the Annan River (eight kilometres south of the Endeavour River) and at the Endeavour River landing itself. William Hann, leader of the Northern Exploration Party of 1872, discovered what he described as 'an old deserted fishing establishment belonging to Towns and Company of Sydney' at the Annan River mouth on 22 December 1872.[49] And members of Dalrymple's party, on their arrival at the Endeavour River landing on 24 October 1873, found carved in a tree the initial 'G', which reputedly had been done some years earlier by one Phillip Garland from the fishing station at Hope Island.[50]

Certainly, Towns and Company was involved in the *bêche-de-mer* industry or, at least, the transportation of small cargoes to the Chinese community in Sydney, which would explain the Annan River presence.[51] It is also possible that the hut could have belonged to ASN (the Australasian Steam Navigation Company of Sydney). But it is somewhat perplexing why ASN, which only extended its northern Queensland trade service to

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47 See in G.C. Bolton, *A thousand miles away: a history of Queensland to 1920* Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1963, pp. 76-7.

48 That said, Dalrymple broke off his detailed exploration of the coast just north of Double Island (between Cairns and Port Douglas), to head for his planned rendezvous with Phillip Sellheim at the Endeavour River on 1 November (as discussed later in this chapter): See Dalrymple, 'Narrative ...', p. 634. So Dalrymple could well have missed any evidence of timber cutters operating along the coast.

49 Hann, 'Report from the Leader ...', p. 13.

50 As reported in *The Cooktown Courier,* 30 October 1875, p. 2. See also the earlier report – later discredited – from Sub-Inspector Tompson, a member of Dalrymple's party, who claimed that it was the letter 'C' (provoking rumours it had been made by Captain Cook): letter Tompson to Colonial Secretary, 25 October 1873, in-letter 1570 of 1873, COL/A185, QSA.

51 See P. Carver, *Captain Robert Towns 1794-1873,* Maritime Museum of Townsville, Townsville, 1993, p. 31.

Townsville in 1865, would have ventured as far north as the Endeavour River.[52] Perhaps the ASN's steamer *SS Leichhardt,* which was to bring the government party to the landing in October 1873, had indeed forayed northwards beforehand, possibly en route to the *bêche-de-mer* station at Three Isles.[53]

What is clear from the preceding discussion is that the Endeavour River was no 'pristine' landing, untouched by white man since its discovery by Captain Cook, as some early commentators would have us believe. Rather, the Endeavour River and its environs were being visited from the sea with increasing regularity prior to the establishment of permanent white settlement in late 1873, as part of the gradual development and 'opening up' of Far North Queensland and the Queensland coastline in general.[54]

The Maritime Dimensions of Development

Within that context, the likes of Dalrymple saw the development of a settlement at the Endeavour River not so much as opening up new pastoral or agricultural districts, but as a stimulant to 'the valuable pearl-shell, *bêche-de-mer* and turtle fisheries along this coast'.[55] Others would no doubt have seen trade opportunities coinciding with the Queensland Government's contract with the Eastern and Australian Steamship Company of April 1873 for a steamship service to operate between Brisbane and Singapore, commencing in December 1873.[56]

Beyond the development of local fisheries industries and trade, Dalrymple's vision (no doubt shared by influential politicians and bureaucrats in Brisbane and London) was that the development of the Queensland coastline formed part of a grander strategic plan wherein

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52 A brief discussion on ASN's expansion into the northern Queensland trade can be found in R. Parsons, *A pioneer Australian steamship company,* Parsons, Lobethal, 1970, pp. 39-40.

53 If that was the case, it would also explain Captain Saunders' masterly handling of the *SS Leichhardt* on 25 October 1873, wherein 'the way (he) brought his vessel right alongside the south bank of the river was the theme of general commendation': unidentified correspondent to *The Brisbane Courier,* 29 November 1873, p. 5.

54 Coastal development, for example, occurred in the progression of Rockhampton 1853, Mackay 1862, Townsville 1864 and Cardwell 1864.

55 Dalrymple, 'Narrative ...', p. 650.

56 See the discussion of this aspect in N. Kirkman, 'From Minority to Majority: Chinese on the Palmer River Gold-field, 1873-76' in Reynolds, *Race relations in North Queensland,* p. 243.

> the annexation and settlement of New Guinea will then alone remain to complete the consolidation of British power and commerce in the Pacific and Indian oceans.[57]

Indeed, the strategic dimension to the development of the Queensland coastline is evident in a missive of 1872 from the Imperial Government (in London) authorising Queensland to annex all islands within 100 kilometres of the coast at the earliest opportunity.[58] On that basis, the Government in Brisbane had underlying commercial and strategic reasons to continue the pattern of northerly coastal development.

That said, the importance of maritime-related trade or strategic considerations, in terms of the eventual decision to establish a settlement at the Endeavour River, should not be overstated. Moreover, they are clearly subordinate to reasons which arose from a particular set of circumstances relating to the exploitation of the mineral resources of Far North Queensland. To put that situation into its broader context, it is useful to look briefly at the process by which Far North Queensland was 'opened up' during the 1860s and 1870s.[59]

The Early Land Explorers of Far North Queensland

Contrary to contemporary media accounts, the advance of 'civilisation' into Far North Queensland was not the motivating factor in early exploratory expeditions; greater interest lay in investigating trade routes through North Queensland with a view to improving access between the settled districts of New South Wales and the trading centres of India and China.

Ludwig Leichhardt's expedition of 1844-5, for example, was commissioned by the Government to establish the feasibility of an overland

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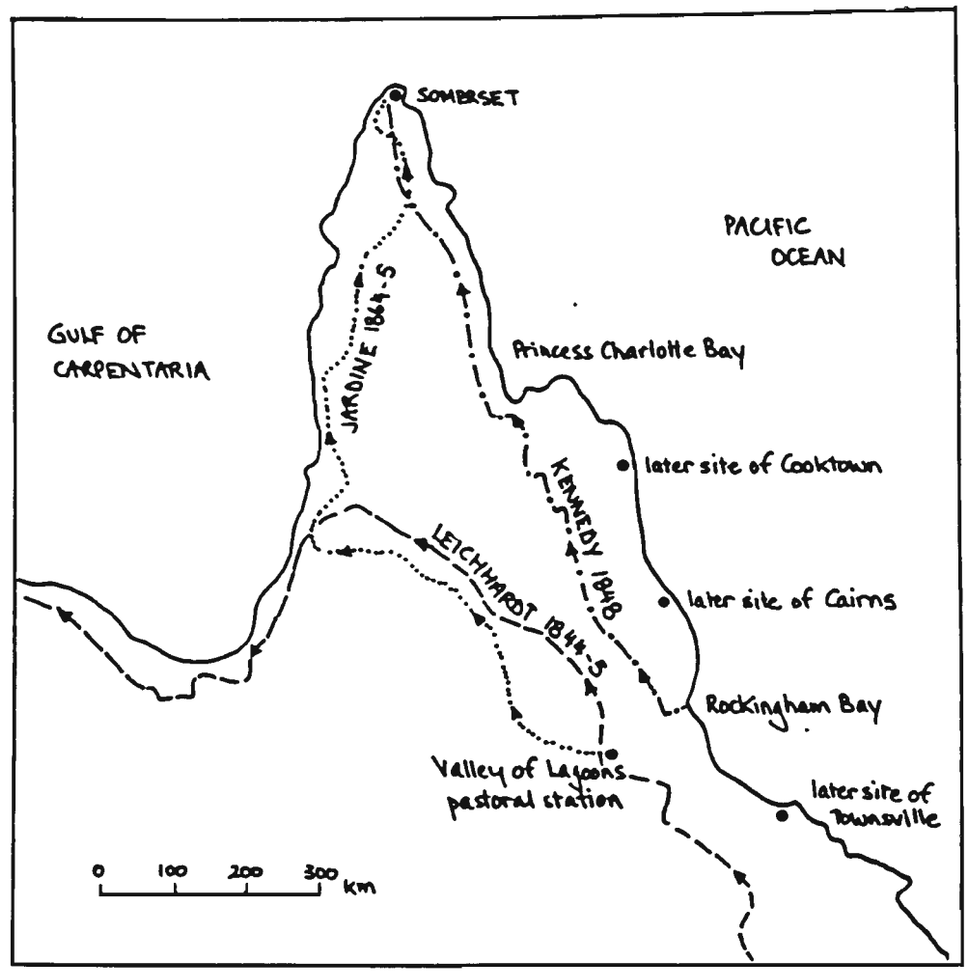
57 Dalrymple, 'Narrative ...', p. 650.

58 J. Farnfield, *Frontiersman: a biography of G.E. Dalrymple,* Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1968, p. 140.

59 The economic dimensions of the early development of Far North Queensland are discussed in more detail in Chapter 6 'Small Town in a Large Colony'.

route from Brisbane to Port Essington (on the Cobourg Peninsula in what is now the Northern Territory).[60] Leichhardt's expedition followed the Mitchell River from its headwaters west of Cardwell to the Gulf of Carpentaria, before turning south towards what is now Normanton (see Map 2.3 below).

Map 2.3 - The Routes of Early Land Explorers Into Far North Queensland



Source: Compiled from the map data of N. Loos, 'A Chapter of Contact: Aboriginal-European Relations in North Queensland 1606-1992' in H. Reynolds ed., *Race relations in North Queensland,* James Cook University, Townsville, 1993, p. 9.

Although not generally realised, Edmund Kennedy's fateful expedition of 1848 was also more than simply a trek from Rockingham Bay

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60 See Bolton, *A thousand miles away,* pp. 10-11. Port Essington, which had been established as a trading settlement with Asia in 1838, was eventually abandoned in 1849. But Captain John Stokes, who explored much of the Gulf country in 1841, had reported favourably on the possibility of an overland route from the settled districts of the south: See, for example, J. Stokes, *Discoveries in Australia: with an account of the coasts and rivers explored and surveyed during the voyage of HMS Beagle, in the years 1837-43,* Vol. 2, Boone, London, 1846, pp. 82 and 272.

(or what is now Cardwell) to Cape York. It was intended as a projection of earlier expeditions to find a route to the Gulf, only this time starting from the south.[61] Similarly, the expedition of the Jardine brothers in 1864-5 was primarily to prove the feasibility of overlanding cattle from the Gulf country to Somerset, which had been founded in 1862 in the hope of it becoming 'the Singapore of Australia'.[62]

As can be seen from Map 2.3 (page 62), though, none of the early land explorers went anywhere near the landing on the Endeavour River. Kennedy, who came closest, passed some 120 kilometres to the west. Moreover, none of the early land explorers saw anything about the countryside of Far North Queensland which gave them cause to report favourably on its prospects for settlement. Indeed, from 1848 until the mid 1860s, Far North Queensland languished in continued isolation, with no European intrusion except for the struggling settlement at Somerset, on the tip of the peninsula, and the single cattle drive of the Jardine brothers along the western coastline.[63]

The Expansion of the Pastoral Frontier

Elsewhere in Queensland, however, the pastoral frontier was rapidly spreading inland and northwards from the 'settled districts' of Brisbane and the Darling Downs. Pastoralists were favoured by the Queensland Government's land legislation of 1860, which allocated large tracts of land for pastoral purposes, but only as an 'imperative forerunner to ... extensive settlement'.[64] By 1863, most of the Kennedy district had been taken up by squatters and, by 1864, the wave of pastoral expansion had spread into all parts of North Queensland, except Cape York Peninsula.[65] By 1865, the Firths and Atkinson had pushed up to Mount Surprise (inland

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61 See E. Beale, *Kennedy of Cape York,* Rigby, Adelaide, 1970, pp. 142-3.

62 Bolton, *A thousand miles away,* p. 27.

63 There was also a short-lived Anglican mission presence at Somerset from February 1867 to August 1868: see J. Bayton, *Cross over Carpentaria: being a history of the Church of England in Northern Australia from 1865-1965,* Smith & Paterson, Brisbane, 1965, pp. 33-7.

64 See D. May, 'The North Queensland Beef Cattle Industry: An Historical Overview' in *Lectures on North Queensland history,* 4th series, James Cook University, Townsville, 1984, pp. 121-1.

65 See Loos, 'A Chapter of Contact ...', pp. 11-2.

from Cardwell and some eight-five kilometres east of Georgetown), by then the most northerly outstation in North Queensland.[66]

The importance of the rapid spread of the pastoral frontier into North Queensland was that the advance of 'civilisation' provided a convenient 'stepping off' point for later prospecting parties heading further north. Moreover, by the early 1870s, the pastoral stations were well placed to provide a ready supply of meat to the newly-discovered goldfields of the north, notwithstanding the difficulties of access often imposed by the terrain and the wet season. That market, of course, in turn gave a new lease of life to many of the northern stations, and, indeed, triggered a second wave of pastoral expansion, with southern stations then being able to restock those in the north.[67]

The Opening of the Northern Goldfields

In late 1868, the Government — probably conscious that the alluvial workings and shallow reef mines at Gympie were petering out — appointed Daintree an official geologist, with instructions to conduct surveys into the Gilbert River area. His cautiously-worded report of April 1869, advising of alluvial gold being found on the upper reaches of the Gilbert River, prompted a repeat of the rush to Gympie.[68] Within weeks, the ports of Townsville and Cardwell were filled with thousands of would-be diggers arriving on steamships from Brisbane, New South Wales, Victoria, New Zealand and Canton, while hundreds more slowly made their way northwards on foot from Gympie, Brisbane and even New South Wales.[69]

Throughout 1870, miners from the Gilbert River followed new 'mini' rushes' to Mount Hogan, Percy River, Robertson River, Mosquito Creek, Western Creek, Talbot Creek and Delaney River.[70] Indeed, by the end of 1871, most of the Gilbert River's 'population' of 2000-3000 had moved to the

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66 J. Wegner, 'Aborigines of the Etheridge Shire, 1860-1940' in Reynolds, *Race relations,* p. 137.

67 May, 'The North Queensland Beef Cattle Industry ...', p. 126.

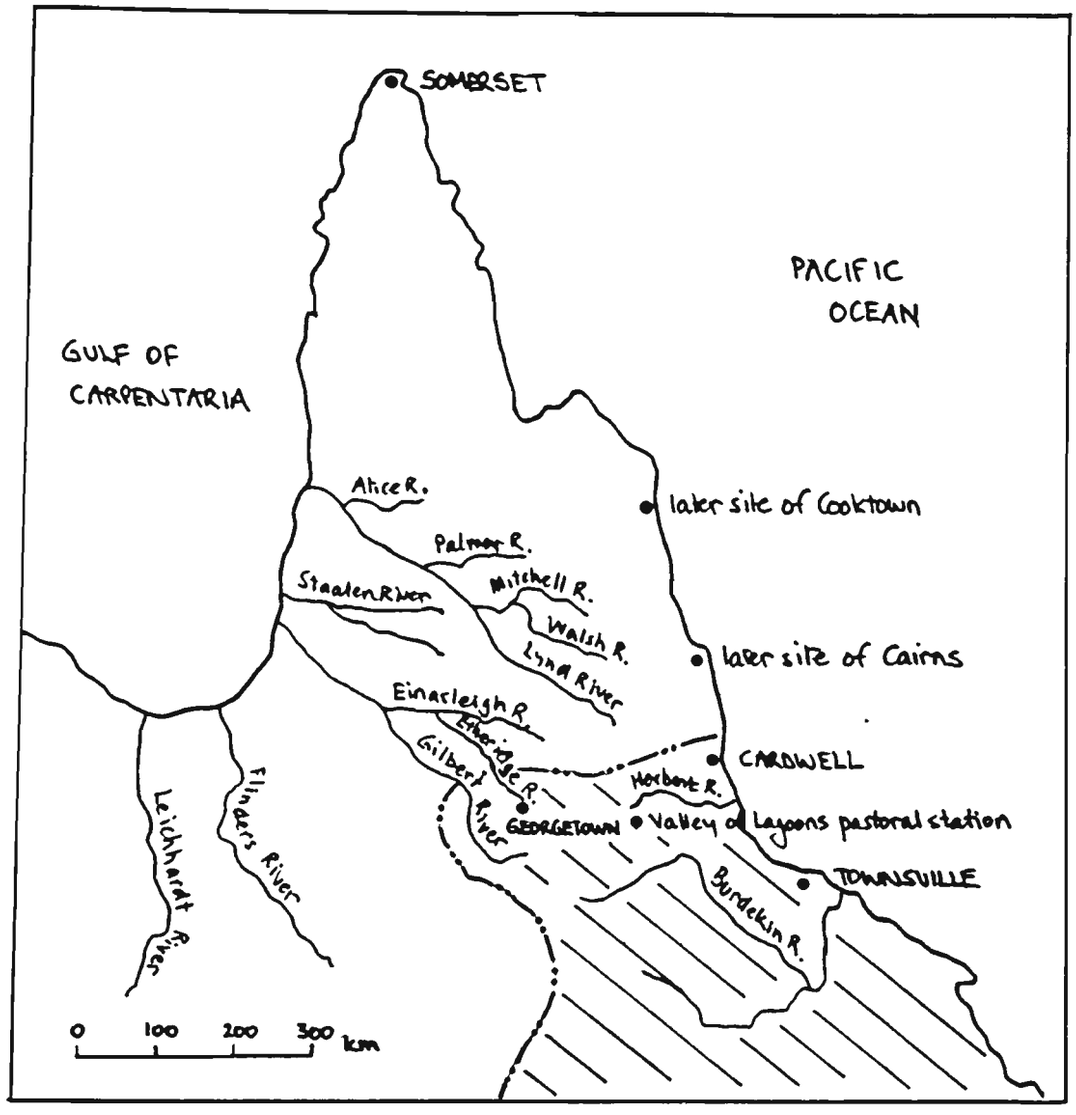
68 By the time Daintree telegraphed his initial report on 7 April 1869, there were already over 200 men on the ground: see 'Report of Mr Daintree, Government Geologist, Northern Queensland, on Gold Discoveries in the Gilbert Ranges', *QVP,* 2, 1869, p. 163. For an account of the early days of the Gilberton rush, see R.B. Brown, 'A History of the Gilbert River Goldfield 1869-1874', BA Hons thesis, James Cook University, Townsville, 1974, pp. 4-7.

69 Brown, 'A History of the Gilbert River Goldfield', p. 5.

70 See Brown, 'A History of the Gilbert River Goldfield ...', p. 115.

newly-discovered fields of the Etheridge River (or its township of Georgetown), some ninety kilometres to the north.[71] By early 1872, therefore, the spread of 'civilisation' was just beginning to encroach into Far North Queensland (see Map 2.4 below).

Map 2.4 - The Extent of the Pastoral and Mining Frontiers in North Queensland by 1872



71 See Brown, 'A History of the Gilbert River Goldfield ...', p. 115.

The years 1871-72, however, also saw a pause in any further expansion northwards. Georgetown was some 425 kilometres *via* the Gilbert River by road from the nearest port at Cardwell, while Gilberton itself (on the Gilbert River) was 480 kilometres from Townsville and 335 kilometres from Cardwell.[72] The cost burdens imposed by distance and the lack of settlement were becoming prohibitive, while the exodus of miners (and police) from the Gilbert River to the northerly fields left those remaining in Gilberton vulnerable to attack by Aborigines.[73] Moreover, the discovery of gold at Charters Towers in early 1872 led to some redirection of the northerly rush, although the fact that it was a quartz reef rather than alluvial field meant that it provided little attraction to the typical northern digger.[74]

The Push towards the Palmer

Presumably because of the slowdown in the northern goldfields (or possibly to keep the momentum going), the Government in February 1872 commissioned William Hann to lead an expedition to what is now Coen 'to ascertain ... the character of the country and its mineral resources with a view to future settlement and occupation'.[75] The importance of this expedition, apart from the discoveries it made, is that it was the first initiative by the Queensland Government specifically linking exploration in Far North Queensland to future settlement.

Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that the Colonial Secretary would have been impressed that it then took Hann four months to assemble and provision his party, before departing from Fossilbrook (near Mount Surprise station) on 26 June 1872 (see Map 2.5 at page 67).[76] Neither probably did the Colonial Secretary expect that Hann and his party would be away for five

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72 See Brown, 'A History of the Gilbert River Goldfield ...', p.10.

73 Gilberton's eventual demise was often popularly attributed to aboriginal resistance, a proposition refuted by Brown in 'A History of the Gilbert River Goldfield ...'.

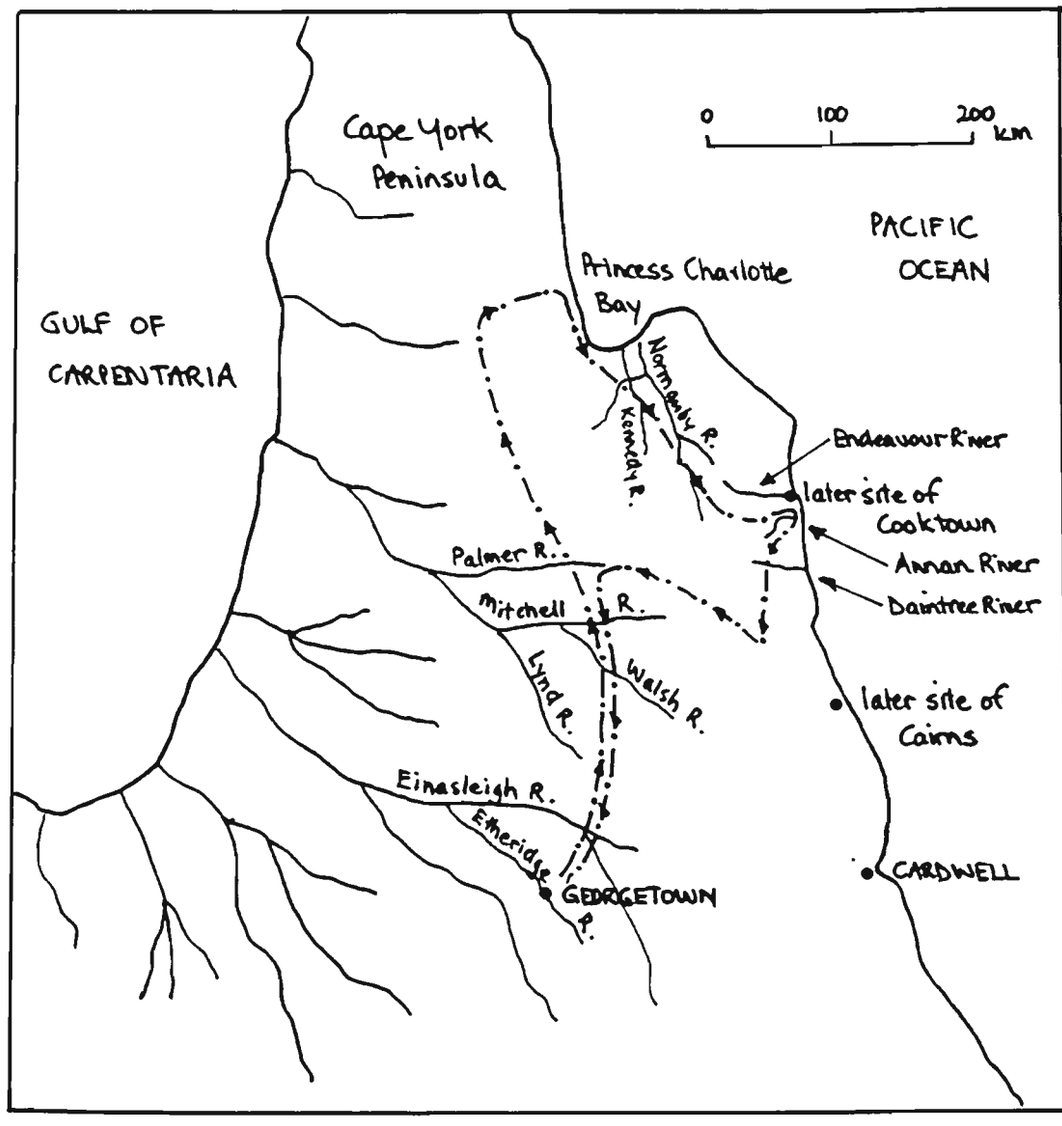
74 Exaggerated telegrams announcing a great alluvial rush to a second Bendigo did however draw several thousand diggers from southern ports: see D. Menghetti, 'The Gold Mines of Charters Towers' in *Readings in North Queensland mining history,* p. 53.

75 See Hann, 'Report ...', p. 1031. Daintree was by then unavailable, having been appointed Agent-General for Queensland in London in 1871: see Farnfield, 'George Elphinstone Dalrymple ...', p. 274.

76 Indeed, Hann spent the first page of his eventual report explaining why it took so long to get started, laying the blame largely on conflicting instructions from Brisbane over the composition of his party: see Hann, 'Report ...', p. 1031.

months (returning to Mount Surprise in mid-November 1872), nor that it would take until early 1873 before Hann's report finally reached Brisbane.[77]

Map 2.5 - The Expedition Route of William Hann: June-November 1872



Source: Compiled from map data in R.L. Jack, *Northmost Australia*, Vols. 1 and 2, Robertson, Melbourne, 1922, Sheets A-M.

77 Hann's final report, dated 20 December 1872, reached the Colonial Secretary's office on 20 February 1873: see in-letter 792 of 1873, WOR 670/73, QSA. There is no evidence to suggest that any excerpts or summary of the report were telegraphed to Brisbane in advance of the final report, except for the telegraphed advice of 12 November notifying the Minister for Works that the party had returned safely: see Hann, 'Report ..., p. 1069.

It took another five months before Hann's report was tabled in Parliament on 28 May 1873.[78] Given that Hann's party had found numerous traces of gold on what he named the Palmer River on 9 August 1872, it seems extraordinary that the Government (or indeed Hann and his men) made no attempt to publicise the discovery before the tabling of the report.[79] One possibility is that the Colonial Secretary or Minister for Works had by then become concerned that the headlong rush as far as the Etheridge, with its concomitant implications for the safety of miners and the provision of infrastructure and services, was already straining the resources of the Government. To avoid a further rush to the Palmer, the Government could deliberately have 'sat on the news'.

More difficult to explain is why Hann and his men kept their mouths shut over the discovery, from November 1872 until June 1873, especially given that the Etheridge community would have been eagerly awaiting the news from their expedition. Hann, it is acknowledged, was careful in the conclusions to his report not to raise expectations unduly and, indeed, cautioned that 'I trust that nobody will be led away by anything that I have stated to jump to the conclusion that it is here in payable quantities'.[80] It seems unrealistic to expect, however, that his men would have been so equally concerned. The possibility exists, therefore, that news of the discovery did not leak because Hann and his men returned almost immediately to the Palmer as a private prospecting party, and were there months ahead of its 'discovery' by James Venture Mulligan. At the least, history should record that it was a Frederick Warner who first discovered gold at the Palmer River on 9 August 1872, not James Venture Mulligan a year later.[81]

The other interesting twist to Hann's expedition is that his leg from Princess Charlotte Bay to the south (see Map 2.5 at page 67) struck the coast at the Annan River, which he incorrectly described as the Endeavour landing with 'its site ... well suited for a small settlement which should be

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78 Tabled by the Minister for Works on the first day of sitting in 1873: *QVP,* 1, 1873, p. 2.

79 Hann's journal entry for 9 August recorded that 'we have now found the existence of gold on both sides of the [Palmer] river': Hann, 'Report ...', p. 1050.

80 Hann, "Report ...', p. 1036. See also Jack, *Northmost Australia,* Vol. 2, p. 387 noting that 'to report payable gold was a serious responsibility, and diggers returning from an unsuccessful rush were ugly customers for the reporter to meet'.

81 See Hann, 'Report ...', p. 1050. Certainly, it seems that Hann was a well-known identity at the Palmer River by June 1874: see *CHPRA,* 3 June 1874, p. 2 reporting his arrival in the township, presumably after a prospecting expedition in the area.

on the north side'.[82] A.C. Macmillan, co-leader of the government party to the Endeavour River in October 1873, concluded that 'Mr Hann may have mistaken this large salt water river [the Annan] ... for the Endeavour' and, to substantiate his suspicions, found Hann's relevant camp markers to the south of Mount Cook.[83] Given that Macmillan's party was supposed to follow Hann's route from the coast westwards to the Palmer, there was a slight possibility therefore — as mentioned earlier — that the settlement of Cooktown could have had its beginnings at the Annan River.

Back at the Etheridge, James Venture Mulligan (see Plate 2.3 at page 70), a longstanding prospector of the northern goldfields, was commissioned by a group of miners in early June 1873 to lead a prospecting party to the Palmer, once Hann's report became public.[84] After three months away, Mulligan and his five fellow prospectors returned to Georgetown (the headquarters of the Etheridge field) on 4 September 1873 with 102 ounces of gold, triggering what was to become the biggest gold rush in the history of Queensland.[85]

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82 Hann, 'Report ...', p. 1058.

83 A.C. Macmillan to Secretary of Works, 30 October 1875, in-letter 4598 of 1873, WOR/A74,QSA.

84 Jack, *Northmost Australia,* Vol. 2, p. 413 contends that Mulligan's party was but one of several which set out as soon as Hann's report was made public.

85 For Mulligan's report of this, his first of six expeditions over the next four years, see Jack, *Northmost Australia,* Vol. 2, pp. 413-7.

Plate 2.3 — James Venture Mulligan

JAMES VENTURE MULLIGAN, 1905.

Source: R.L. Jack, *Northmost Australia*, Vol. 2, Robertson, Melbourne, 1922, p. 424.

The Palmer River Rush

Mulligan and his party stayed in Georgetown only long enough to report the discovery and to reprovision, before setting out again on 12 September 1873 for the Palmer followed by a swarm of local miners.[86] If the Etheridge fields were on the furthest edge of 'civilisation', then the Palmer River, a further 350 kilometres to the north, was definitely 'beyond the frontier'. Moreover, getting to the Palmer involved crossing the Einasleigh, Lynd, Tate, Walsh and Mitchell Rivers — a formidable if not impossible task with the onset of the wet season looming. Indeed, the Georgetown correspondent to *The Brisbane Courier,* noting that Mulligan's

86 The main purpose in reporting any significant discovery was to lay claim to the reward from government usually offered to 'practical discovers of payable gold', which varied between $500 and $2,000.

party was returning with provisions to last until the following April, warned that 'it would be useless for diggers to go to the place without providing themselves with at least eight months' rations'.[87]

Such warnings were echoed in southern newspapers, with the strong advice that any rush from the south be postponed until after the wet season.[88] A letter from Mulligan was similarly published, with the plea 'for God's sake do not attempt to come, as people caught out ... without rations must perish in the rainy season, there are so many large rivers'.[89] In Georgetown, anyway, those warnings were largely unheeded and by mid September 1873, an estimated 400 miners had left or were about to leave for the Palmer.[90]

An Unrelated Government Initiative

A reconstruction of events from earlier in 1873 suggests that the Minister for Works, William Walsh, having digested Hann's report of the land exploration of the countryside between the Etheridge and Princess Charlotte Bay, decided that the next step should be a maritime expedition of the northern coast between Cardwell and the Endeavour River. The expedition would explore all rivers, inlets and creeks to ascertain to what extent the soil was suitable for agriculture and how far the rivers were navigable by small raft.[91]

The Minister's dilemma was in finding a suitable expedition leader; Daintree was in England, Howard St George was gold commissioner at the Etheridge, Dalrymple was gold commissioner at Gilberton, Sellheim was managing a pastoral station at the Valley of Lagoons and Hann was only recently returned from the land expedition of 1872.

A letter from Dalrymple to the Minister for Works dated 22 July 1873 (but probably not received in Brisbane until early August) solved the leadership problem. Dalrymple advised that the population of the Gilbert

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87 *The Brisbane Courier,* 6 September 1873, p. 4.

88 See *The Brisbane Courier,* 13 September 1873, p. 4.

89 *The Brisbane Courier,* 13 September 1873, p. 4.

90 From the Etheridge correspondent of the *Cleveland Bay Express,* reproduced in *The Brisbane Courier,* 18 October 1873, p. 6.

91 As stated in the eventual instructions to G.E. Dalrymple in 'Narrative ...', p. 619.

River fields had so fallen away (as miners moved to the Etheridge), that 'my services have become unnecessary here' as gold commissioner.[92] Accordingly, the Minister telegraphed Dalrymple with the news of his appointment as leader of the northeast coast expedition and instructed him to proceed forthwith to Cardwell to take command of arrangements for the expedition. After handing over his duties to the mining registrar, Dalrymple departed Gilberton on 3 September and proceeded initially to Georgetown, arriving there on 5 or 6 September, probably intending to brief his former superior, Howard St George, on his appointment and forthcoming expedition.[93]

Once in Georgetown, of course, Dalrymple quickly heard the news of Mulligan and his party, who had themselves only arrived back two days before from their thirteen-week prospecting trip to the Palmer. From that point on, much of Dalrymple's thinking was on 'the calamity of a rush to the Palmer' and on what he could do to assist.[94] It is clear, however, that the Government's initial intention in commissioning the northeast coast expedition was not as a result of the Palmer rush, but was simply related to exploration, and that 'the connection between the two was the result of coincidence'.[95]

Dalrymple's Rescue Plan

Dalrymple, like many of the prominent figures involved in the early days of North Queensland, had a strong sense of patriotism and civic responsibility, and his concerns that 'the government in Brisbane could not possibly be aware of the urgency of the situation' were undoubtedly genuinely founded.[96] There was, however, in Dalrymple (like in Mulligan especially) an element of 'popular heroics', with the motivation of public acclaim and possible financial remuneration a not insignificant factor in his dealings over the coming weeks.[97]

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92 G.E. Dalrymple to Minister for Works and Mines, 22 July 1873, in-letter 5171 of 1873, WOR/A76, QSA.

93 See Farnfield, *Frontiersman,* p. 121.

94 See Farnfield, *Frontiersman,* p. 124.

95 Farnfield 'George Elphinstone Dalrymple ...', p. 282.

96 Farnfield, *Frontiersman,* p. 124.

97 Dalrymple had, for example, explored the Bowen and Burdekin River areas in 1859 and, later, pioneered the original dray-road between Cardwell and the Gilbert and Etheridge goldfields: Farnfield, *Frontiersman,* p. 117.

Indeed, once at Cardwell, Dalrymple telegraphed his old friend, Phillip Sellheim, manager of the pastoral station at Valley of Lagoons (who had been with Dalrymple on an earlier expedition in 1859), asking him to try to ascertain a more exact location of Mulligan's find on the Palmer. In a letter back to Dalrymple, dated 14 September 1873, Sellheim (who was also a justice of the peace at Georgetown) suggested 'the advisability of keeping your eye on the country when you are at the Endeavour with a view to getting a road from the Palmer to the seaboard', adding that 'unless communication with the coast is opened at once, utter starvation must be the consequence'.[98]

Whether or not the concept of a road from the Palmer to the Endeavour was an original thought from Sellheim is not clear. Certainly, the same idea had been propounded four days earlier by James Venture Mulligan in a letter to an undisclosed friend, in which he stated:

> I would advise that the Government open a port at Weary or Endeavour Bays, or thereabouts. According to Mr Hann, a tolerably good road can be got from there to the Palmer in 60 or 70 miles. Fancy nearly 600 miles inland carriage ... which could be done in less than 100![99]

Mulligan presumably would also have been pushing the same suggestion publicly during his few days' stay in Georgetown from 4-12 September.

In the event, Dalrymple by mid September was seized of the notion that he and Sellheim might be able to open an access route from the Palmer to the coast. By an exchange of telegrams between the two, in Cardwell and Georgetown respectively, it was agreed that Dalrymple would proceed by sea to the Endeavour River landing, exploring as commissioned en route, while Sellheim would take a small party overland to the Palmer, following Mulligan's track, and from there would blaze a route to the Endeavour River, using Hann's chart from the 1872 expedition. Sellheim was confident that he could be at the Endeavour within a month of starting out.[100]

Although no record of the communications exist, Dalrymple contended that he obtained government sanction for the scheme by

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98 P. Sellheim to G.E. Dalrymple, 14 September 1873, in-letter 1729 of 1874, WOR/A82, QSA.

99 Published in *The Brisbane Courier,* 11 October 1873, p. 5.

100 Further details are discussed in Farnfield, 'George Elphinstone Dalrymple ...', pp. 286-7.

telegram.[101] Before he left Cardwell on 28 September, Dalrymple sent a final telegram to Sellheim with the promise

> I will anchor inside Endeavour Mouth on 1st November and remain until you come. Will bring you month's rations. Am just off. Bon voyage.[102]

The New Government Initiatives of October 1873

Unbeknown to Dalrymple, his agitation — together with further worrying reports and dire predictions from the Etheridge throughout late September and early October — prompted the Government to take more substantive measures to ensure the safety of the hundreds of miners likely to be trapped at the Palmer with the onset of the wet season. The Dalrymple plan, after all, placed much store in Sellheim, with a party of two whites and three Aborigines, being able to cut a track through an area which it had taken Hann's well-armed and well-equipped party some forty days to traverse (albeit *via* Weary Bay). Moreover, the Dalrymple plan offered no immediate prospect for the resupply of the Palmer, given that Dalrymple had no spare provisions (or carriers) to send to the field, nor would those on the Palmer have any way of knowing whether Sellheim's route was viable until someone returned along it.

Accordingly, the Government put in place two further initiatives, while sending instructions to Sellheim to halt his proposed move.[103] The first and major effort involved the steamship SS *Leichhardt* and HM surveying schooner *Pearl,* under the commands of Captain Saunders and Lieutenant Connor RN respectively, being despatched from Brisbane on 15 October 1873, bound for Bowen, Townsville, Cardwell and the Endeavour River.[104] At Bowen, the ships were to take on board A.C. Macmillan and staff from the Roads Department, and at Cardwell collect Howard St George, gold commissioner from Georgetown, a number of his staff and a police detachment under the command of Sub-Inspector Douglas. The 'expedition'

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101 But see telegram Secretary of Works to P. Sellheim, dated 13 October 1873, letter-book 3946 of 1873, WOR/A82, QSA, advising that no such approval existed.

102 Telegram G.E. Dalrymple to P. Sellheim, 27 September 1873, in-letter 1729 of 1874, WOR/A82, QSA.

103 As it turned out, Sellheim's party had already expended £580 and had commenced their trek when ordered to stop. Sellheim's disgruntled men threatened to sue him: see *The Brisbane Courier,* 6 November 1873, p. 2.

104 A good account of the voyage north and his impressions of the landing at the Endeavour River were provided by the correspondent to the *Cleveland Bay Express,* as reproduced in *The Brisbane Courier,* 29 November 1873, p. 5.

also included some 180 would-be diggers, forty-five horses, 'tons upon tons' of merchandise and a few gentlemen on 'pleasure bent'.[105]

Details of the official instructions to St George do not seem to have survived.[106] It is clear from the correspondence to Macmillan, however, that his instructions were primarily to open a road from the Endeavour River to the Palmer diggings.[107] Once a suitable route was found, St George's task would then be to establish an official presence on the Palmer River goldfields and, if needed, 'to afford relief and succour to the diggers on the field'.[108] Whether or not Macmillan had specific instructions to establish a settlement at the Endeavour River will be discussed shortly.

The second, smaller and more speculative initiative involved the despatch of a five-man expedition, under the charge of Bartley Fahey, sub-collector of customs at Normanton, to explore the Mitchell River from the Gulf of Carpentaria, with the view 'to ascertaining ... the possibility of its use as a means of communication from the Gulf to the Palmer goldfields'.[109] The expedition was to depart Normanton on 23 October on board the SS *Royal Duke* for a rendezvous at the Mitchell River mouth with the customs cutter, *The Duke of Edinburgh,* which was being despatched from Brisbane with supplies for the party. It was expected that the expedition would be away for about one month.[110]

Media and other Pressures on the Government

The reasoning behind this flurry of government activity is difficult to ascertain. Certainly, the Government was becoming increasingly responsive to the need to appoint gold commissioners to new fields as soon

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105 *The Brisbane Courier,* 29 November 1873, p. 5.

106 A note on the Department of Works general correspondence file for 1873 advises 'all papers related to Palmer River Gold Rush and goldfields regulations lent to Mines Department 13 December 1911': see WOR/A72, QSA. No further trace of the papers has been found.

107 See Under-Secretary of Works to A.C. Macmillan, undated letter of October 1873, letter-book 1653 of 1873, WOR/G8, QSA, advising 'the duties to be performed ... will be the discovery of the best road from the Endeavour River to the diggings.

108 As reported in *The Brisbane Courier,* 27 November 1873, p. 2. See also the cabinet submission dated 14 October 1873 by Secretary of Works noting that 'the objects of this expedition are generally to guard against the hardships which must be endured by the diggers ... unless some communication is speedily opened with the eastern seaboard': letter-book 4574 of 1873, WOR/A75, QSA.

109 As reported in *The Brisbane Courier,* 30 October 1873, p. 3.

110 *The Brisbane Courier,* 30 October 1873, p. 3.

after their discovery as possible, not least to enable the timely collection of revenue from miners' licences and the like.[111] Moreover, the situation on the Palmer was probably the first where there was a foreseeable prospect that many lives would be lost primarily because of the lack of infrastructure (roads, bridges and telegraph), as opposed to previous losses on other fields due to lawlessness or clashes with Aborigines, which could be remedied in part by the provision at relatively short notice of a police contingent.

In addition to the humanitarian concerns being expressed in newspapers, the Government was also under some pressure from the media on issues of 'development', and over reports that 'the rising of the rivers about Christmas will completely cut off all communication between the new diggings and the outside world for several months'.[112] The Etheridge-based correspondent of the *Cleveland Bay Express,* for example, not only urged 'the Government to lose no time in causing an examination of the country between the Eastern Coast and the new goldfields', but noted that

> The manner in which the South Australian Government is pushing ahead its Northern goldfields should be an example to the Government of Queensland.[113]

With an election looming in early December, the Government of Premier Palmer also did not want a repeat of the Canoona incident of 1858 darkening its election prospects. Much more palatable, from the point of view of impressing the electorate, were newspaper editorials which asserted that 'great credit is unquestionably due to the Government for their prompt action in the emergency consequent on the rush to the Palmer goldfields'.[114] Similarly, Premier Palmer would no doubt have been hoping to bask electorally in some of the glory of a successful expedition by Macmillan and St George, such as

> ... to Mr Palmer as the head of the government we are indebted for the foresight and energy with which the

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111 A gold commissioner was not appointed to the Gilbert River goldfields until some three months after its discovery in April 1869. But Howard St George, as gold commissioner at Gilberton, moved his field headquarters to Georgetown within weeks of the discovery of gold at the Etheridge in October 1871: See Brown, 'A History of the Gilbert River Goldfield ...', pp. 6 and 39.

112 See *The Brisbane Courier,* 18 October 1873, p. 6.

113 As reproduced in *The Brisbane Courier,* 18 October 1873, p. 6.

114 Editorial comment in response to the government's decision to investigate the Mitchell River: *The Brisbane Courier,* 30 October 1873, p. 3.

> combined expeditions ... have been carried out. Mr Palmer's weaknesses are certainly not those of want of energy.[115]

The Arrival of the Expeditions at the Endeavour River

The first of the expeditions to arrive at the Endeavour River was Dalrymple's on 24 October 1873. Even though Dalrymple had arranged with Sellheim that he would not be there until 1 November, the prospect of such an historic rendezvous prompted him to cut short his expedition of the coast and head for the Endeavour River.[116] It seems unlikely that Dalrymple did so just to beat Macmillan and St George, whose expedition he presumably knew nothing of, although it is possible that he could have learnt of their imminent arrival from the captain of a passing vessel. Certainly, Dalrymple seemed duly flabbergasted when the SS *Leichhardt* steamed into the Endeavour River on 25 October, one day after his own arrival.[117]

Dalrymple was, however, clearly peeved that his initiative had been upstaged by St George (who, in turn, failed even to mention Dalrymple's presence at the Endeavour River in his first report to the Secretary for Lands and Mines).[118] In a letter to the Colonial Secretary of 30 October 1873, Dalrymple acknowledged receipt of the new instructions from Brisbane advising that Sellheim had been ordered not to proceed to the Endeavour River and, with a tinge of sarcasm, reported that he had been about to carry out his previously-given instructions 'to report ... on the feasibility of forming a settlement here' when interrupted by St George's arrival.[119]

Dalrymple also reported that his offer of 'every assistance in my power' had been declined by both St George and Macmillan. In what should probably be seen as a fit of pique, Dalrymple then decided to split his own expedition with him returning alone to Cardwell to seek official approval for

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115 See *The Brisbane Courier,* 26 November 1873, p. 2. In the event, Palmer's government was defeated at the election.

116 In his journal, Dalrymple justified his early arrival by explaining that if he had waited longer, unfavourable winds could have prevented him from making the rendezvous: Dalrymple, 'Narrative ...', p. 633.

117 Dalrymple, 'Narrative ...', p. 634.

118 H. St George to the Secretary for Lands and Mines, 30 October 1873, in-letter 4598 of 1873, WOR/A74, QSA.

119 See letter G.E. Dalrymple to Colonial Secretary, 30 October 1873, in-letter 1570 of 1873, COL/A185, QSA. It seems most unlikely, though, that Dalrymple ever had *instructions* to report on the feasibility of a settlement.

a revised plan of exploration.[120] In the event, he and his party departed the Endeavour River in the SS *Leichhardt* on 31 October. In the meantime, the landing at the Endeavour River had been transformed as early as the afternoon of the 25th into a bustling settlement, with

> ... men hurrying to and fro, tents rising in all directions, horses grazing, and neighing to their mates, all around us - the shouts of sailors and labourers landing more horses and cargo, combined with the rattling of the donkey engine, cranes and chains.[121]

Surprisingly, though, it was not until 31 October — six days after their arrival — that Macmillan and St George were ready to leave for the Palmer, a somewhat inexplicable delay given the Government's urgency in mounting the expedition and that it was going to take at least another seven to ten days for them to reach the Palmer.

One explanation, and probably the most likely, is that it took the best part of the first week ashore to unload the stores, set up a temporary encampment, conduct a limited reconnaissance of the immediate area and determine the preliminary direction of the route to the Palmer. That accords with the journal notes of an unidentified member of the expedition who recorded:

- Saturday 25th - preparation for landing the horses and choosing a place for the police camp
- Sunday 26th - reconnaissance of the Endeavour River
- Monday 27th - crew landed the horses etc. Macmillan and St George rode out to Mount Cook
- Tuesday 28th - Macmillan conducted preliminary reconnaissance 'for the purpose of deciding on the best road to the Palmer' (and remained away Tuesday night)

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120 Farnfield explains Dalrymple's return to Cardwell as simply 'an opportunity to reorganize the expedition': 'George Elphinstone Dalrymple ...', p. 305. But the correspondent to the *Cleveland Bay Express* claims that 'a fracas had occurred between the leader and some members of the expedition which necessitated Dalrymple's return to Cardwell': see *The Brisbane Courier,* 29 November 1873, p. 5.

121 Dalrymple, 'Narrative ...', p. 635.

- Wednesday 29th - crew employed surveying and landing stores
- Thursday 30th - diggers started (along the 'clear road for twenty-two miles' marked by Macmillan)
- Friday 31st - SS *Leichhardt* departed. Macmillan and St George readying to start out for the Palmer.[122]

That schedule represents, however, a reasonably leisurely pace of activities, given that the same expedition had been able to load all its stores in four separate ports and steam some 1700 kilometres in the previous ten days. A second explanation, therefore, and one not mutually exclusive of the first, is that Macmillan and St George were determined not to leave the establishment of the fledgling settlement in the hands of Dalrymple, who could have claimed — had they left for the Palmer on say, Monday 27 October — that it was he who arrived at the landing first and that it was he who supervised the establishment of the settlement. [123]

A Temporary Encampment or Permanent Settlement?

That rather conspiratorial possibility leads to the question of whether it was the Government's intention to establish a permanent settlement at the Endeavour River, or whether the Macmillan/St George expedition was primarily a 'rescue mission', with the Endeavour River landing a convenient but temporary setting off point. The issue is made uncertain by the fact that the file copy of the instructions from the Under-Secretary of Works to Macmillan has the sentence crossed out reading '[y]ou will also select a suitable site for a Township on the Endeavour'. [124] What is not clear is whether Macmillan's copy was similarly amended or, indeed, whether the sentence was later re-inserted.

In their respective reports to Brisbane dated 30 October 1873, both Macmillan and St George make several mentions of 'the township'.

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122 See *The Brisbane Courier,* 13 November 1873, p. 3.

123 There was, for example, no-one of any authority in the Macmillan/St George expedition who had been charged with remaining at the settlement when the two co-leaders departed for the Palmer.

124 See letter Under-Secretary of Works to A.C. Macmillan, undated October 1873, letter-book 1653 of 1873, WOR/G8, QSA.

Macmillan, for example, specifically reported that 'I have chosen the immediate neighbourhood of Captain Cook's landing for the Township'.[125] St George similarly reported that he and Macmillan had 'proceeded about twelve miles up the river in search of an eligible site for a Township, but could [find] none possessing anything like the advantages of the landing place where the ship lies'.[126] Moreover, Macmillan — a surveyor by trade — actually marked out the main street and the location of several areas reserved for official purposes.[127] It certainly seems, therefore, that Macmillan either had, or thought he had, instructions to establish the beginnings of a permanent settlement at Cook's Town.[128]

Subsequent events, however, cast some doubt on whether Macmillan was so instructed and, indeed, give a touch of substance to the possibility that he and St George had 'established the settlement' to counter the prospect that Dalrymple might otherwise have done so in their absence. The first shadow of doubt comes from newspaper editorials and official correspondence which, in referring to the success of their expedition, only ever mentioned that their task had been to open a road from the Endeavour River to the Palmer goldfields.[129] More significantly, the Government in January 1874 sent James Read, from the Lands Department in Brisbane, 'to select a town site, survey a number of suitable town allotments and mark off wharf frontages', a tasking which hardly would have been necessary if Macmillan had indeed been duly authorised to do the same in October 1873.[130]

Even after that survey by Read, however, it is evident that the Government still had serious doubts over the viability of the settlement, notwithstanding the rapid influx of would-be miners between November 1873 and February 1874. Having just witnessed the 'boom to bust' demise of Gilberton, the newly-elected premier, Arthur Macalister, said that he was

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125 A.C. Macmillan to the Secretary for Works, 30 October 1873, in-letter 4598 of 1873, WOR/A74, QSA.

126 H. St George to the Secretary for Lands and Mines, 30 October 1873, in-letter 4598 of 1873, WOR/A74, QSA.

127 Reported in official mining news, as published in *Brisbane Courier,* 21 January 1874, p. 3.

128 The name Cook's Town was first used, in official correspondence, by Howard St George on 24 November 1873, in a telegraphed report to the Colonial Secretary: as published in *The Brisbane Courier,* 27 November 1873, p. 2.

129 See, for example, a report by courtesy of the Colonial Secretary, published in *The Brisbane Courier,* 27 November 1873, p. 2.

130 Read's instructions reported in official mining news, as published in *The Brisbane Courier,* 21 January 1874, p. 3.

prepared to spend money on Cooktown 'as soon as the place gave indications of its permanency'.[131] Another member of Parliament, in the same debate, said that 'he would not vote a farthing for Cooktown, as he was in daily expectation that [the bureaucracy] ... would demand a large sum to bring the diggers back, as in the case of the Canoona rush sixteen years before'.[132] That comment, at least, needs to be seen in the context of the 'emergency' which arose over the Palmer in February 1874 and the 'return' rush of April 1874, as will be discussed shortly.

The Road to the Palmer Goldfields

When Macmillan and St George departed the Endeavour River on 31 October, their expectation was that it would take them about a week to reach the Palmer River. Macmillan intended that his first trip would be a 'flying survey' and, accordingly, left the bulk of his staff at the Endeavour River, with instructions to erect the government store and clear mangroves from the landing point.[133] As it turned out, finding a route to the Palmer proved easier but more time consuming than expected and their party, along with eighty-six diggers, reached the goldfields on 12 November after a 190-kilometre trek.[134] Macmillan reported that the route would require some clearing of timber to make it accessible to drays, but could be used henceforth by pack animals.

Once at the Palmer, Macmillan and St George found that their arrival had come none too soon, as the 500 men at the diggings were completely out of supplies. The reason, however, was not flooded rivers between the Etheridge and the Palmer, but drought conditions between Townsville and Georgetown, which had turned the country into 'almost a desert' (with no forage available for dray teams).[135] St George decided,

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131 From parliamentary reporting, as reproduced in *The Cooktown Herald and Palmer River Advertiser* (CHPRA), 13 May 1874, p. 3. Macalister would also have been conscious of the six other failed settlements on coastal northern Australia, namely Fort Dundas (1824-29), Fort Wellington (1827-29), Port Essington (again from 1838-49), Gladstone (1847) and Palmerston (1864-67): see P. Bell, 'Houses and Mining Settlement in North Queensland 1861-1920', PhD thesis, James Cook University, Townsville, 1982, p. 37.

132 *CHPRA,* 13 May 1874, p. 3.

133 See Macmillan to the Secretary for Works, 30 October 1873, in-letter 4598 of 1873, WOR/A74, QSA.

134 See letter St George to Secretary for Works and Mines dated 16 November 1873, in-letter 158 of 1874, WOR/A77, QSA.

135 See telegram St George to Colonial Secretary, 24 November 1873, in-letter 2483 of 1873, COL/A189, QSA.

therefore, to send all the available packhorses on the Palmer, some 200 in number, back to the Endeavour River with fifty diggers to collect more rations. Macmillan, incidentally, would also return to the Endeavour and prepare to withdraw his party by 1 December, his duty done.

In the event, Macmillan left the Endeavour River confident that the 'main object of the expedition [had been] fully realised' and that because the Palmer was completely out of supplies, 'the action of the government in sending out this expedition ... [has been] fully justified'.[136] Nevertheless, the miners 'rescued' by Macmillan and St George were never really 'trapped' and were unlikely to die from starvation, given that the route back to the Etheridge was still open to them, albeit that the lack of forage would have made it a difficult trek for stock. The paradox, therefore, is that in opening a temporarily more accessible route *via* the Endeavour River, Macmillan and St George unwittingly exacerbated the eventual emergency of February 1874, by facilitating the ingress of several hundred more miners to the Palmer, as well as providing those already there with the expectation that the Government would come to their eventual assistance.

The 'Emergency' of February 1874

Despite continuing warnings in the media for would-be miners from southern ports to stay away until after the wet season, the opening of the route from the Endeavour River resulted in a flood of new arrivals at Cooktown. *The Brisbane Courier,* for example, reported in mid January that

> In addition to the miners which every steamer from the south is bringing ... vessels are being laid on specially at Sydney and Melbourne, and it is said ... at Adelaide and at more than one of the New Zealand ports. A month hence the little harbour at Cookstown will probably be choke-full.[137]

As well as would-be miners, most ships also brought an increasing number of small businessmen and women, intent on capitalizing on the thriving market for supplies and services. The Townsville correspondent to *The Brisbane Courier*, for example, reported in mid December that 'many

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136 See his interim report, reproduced in *The Brisbane Courier,* 27 November 1873, p. 2.

137 *The Brisbane Courier,* 20 January 1874, p. 2. Indeed, in one week alone in February, nine ships berthed at Cooktown: *The Brisbane Courier,* 21 February 1874, p. 4.

businessmen have gone there, and have taken substantial buildings with them'.[138] Similarly, a reporter in Brisbane observing the departure of the SS *Lord Ashley* on 16 January, with 150 'adventurers' bound for the Palmer, noted that the contingent includes 'several storekeepers, on a small scale, who have migrated with their effects in the hope of making a "pile" '.[139]

By the middle of February, with the wet season well underway, the population of Cooktown had swollen to around 2000, of whom 1000 were miners waiting to move to the Palmer. At the Palmer itself were an estimated 1600-2000 people, reportedly with no meat and only eight to ten tons of flour.[140] On the road between were an estimated 500-1000 would-be miners, trapped between flooded rivers and reportedly reduced to eating horseflesh.[141] The Commissioner of Police, D.T. Seymour, who was visiting Cooktown at the time, ordered the local police sub-inspector to despatch a party to the Daintree River (some ninety kilometres south of Cooktown) to investigate the possibility of an alternative route to the Palmer.[142]

In Brisbane, the situation was seized upon by *The Brisbane Courier,* which ran an alarmist editorial on 28 February 1874, speculating that 'should relief not reach those three of four thousand perishing men ... famine and flood will have left few, very few, to tell the story of their rashness and their misfortunes'.[143] The editorial, while enjoining the Government to take prompt and resolute action, also sought the views of its readers on suggestions for getting relief provisions to the Palmer, hinting that 'liberal rewards' would await solutions which resulted in stores and cattle getting through to the stranded diggers. At the same time, a report reached Brisbane advising that the party despatched to the Daintree River by the Commissioner of Police had been unsuccessful in opening a track to the Palmer.[144]

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138 *The Brisbane Courier,* 15 December 1873, p. 3.

139 *The Brisbane Courier,* 17 January 1874, p. 4.

140 From the report to the Colonial Secretary by Commissioner of Police Seymour: *The Brisbane Courier,* 20 February 1874, p. 2.

141 From the same report, *The Brisbane Courier,* 20 February 1874, p. 2.

142 That was the route suggested earlier by Dalrymple, as an alternative to the route being attempted by A.C. Macmillan: See Dalrymple, 'Narrative ...', p. 649-50.

143 *The Brisbane Courier,* 28 February 1874, p. 4. The figure of 3000-4000 seems considerably exaggerated.

144 Reported in *The Brisbane Courier,* 27 February 1874, p. 2. An earlier report, dated 20 November 1873, had advised that Fahey's expedition to the Mitchell River found no access to the Palmer River diggings from the west: as reproduced in *The Brisbane Courier,* 25 November 1873, p. 3.

The editorial in *The Brisbane Courier* prompted a range of suggestions from its readers, some seemingly sensible, some rather outlandish. Dalrymple, who by that time had retired in ill-health to Brisbane, suggested using rubber dinghies to ferry stores across the flooded rivers.[145] Another reader suggested using 'a rocket apparatus ... to convey stock or any other commodity across rivers of not too great magnitude'.[146] Another suggested a steamship-borne transit of the Kennedy River *via* Princess Charlotte Bay, while another urged that station owners be offered a bonus of £5 per head of cattle delivered to the Palmer within three weeks.[147]

The Government, in the meantime, was certainly not sitting on its hands. The police expedition which had been unsuccessful in finding a route *via* the Daintree River was redirected to the mouth of the Bloomfield River at Weary Bay, with instructions to try again from there.[148] And the police inspector at Cooktown reported in late February that he was about 'to try for a new road to the Palmer ... [and expected] to reach Georgetown in three weeks'.[149] As it turned out, the wet season abated suddenly and, by 12 March 1874, the road from Cooktown to the Palmer was again open.[150]

In the minds of many Brisbane-based bureaucrats and politicians alike, the 'emergency' of February 1874 was further proof of the uncertain viability of Cooktown as the access port for the Palmer River. Their concerns were exacerbated by William Hann, for example, leader of the 1872 expedition into the area, who continued to promote the possibility of a route *via* the Kennedy River to Princess Charlotte Bay, and George Dalrymple's continuing to insist that a route *via* the Daintree River 'provided the nearest and best way to reach the Palmer'.[151] By mid April 1874, however, the initial qualms of the 'doubters' were largely overshadowed by growing scepticism as to the viability of the Palmer itself.

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145 Dalrymple to Colonial Secretary, 6 March 1874, in-letter 471 of 1874, COL/A192, QSA.

146 *The Brisbane Courier,* 28 February 1874, p. 5.

147 See *The Brisbane Courier,* 2 March 1874, p. 3 and 3 March 1874, p. 3.

148 As reported in *The Brisbane Courier,* 27 February 1874, p. 2. Dalrymple, however remained convinced that a route from the Daintree was viable and attributed the failure of the police party to the fact that they had not taken the route which he had recommended: See Fairnfield, 'George Elphinstone Dalrymple ...', p. 311.

149 As reported in *The Brisbane Courier,* 27 February 1874, p. 2.

150 See *The Brisbane Courier,* 13 March 1874, p. 2.

151 See reports in *The Brisbane Courier,* 22 April 1874, p. 3.

The 'Return' Rush of April 1874

As early as mid-March 1874, *The Brisbane Courier* had questioned the justification for 'the mad impulse which has spread from Cape St Vincent to Queensland', noting that

> no appreciable increase in the exports of gold from the Northern ports is perceptible, and not a skittle of trustworthy evidence can be produced to authorise the impetuosity which leads so many to seek what, we fear, will prove the grave of themselves and their delusive expectations.[152]

Those comments were somewhat unfounded given that correspondents in January 1874 were consistently reporting that most of the 600 miners then at the diggings were making at least one ounce of gold per day and that storekeepers, in particular, were hoarding large quantities awaiting the first police escort of gold out of the Palmer after the wet season.[153]

By early April 1874, though, with hundreds of would-be miners stranded either at Cooktown or on the road between there and the Palmer, many individuals were becoming increasingly disconsolate at their prospects of ever reaching the diggings. Moreover, the exorbitant price of provisions at the Palmer, coupled with the extremely harsh conditions, resulted in a number of diggers quitting the field, even though some were reportedly gleaning as much as three ounces of gold per day.[154] There was also the suggestion that 'New Zealanders, Victorians and all except very few of the New South Wales men are not able to stand this climate ... [whereas] the Northern Queensland diggers ... can do moderately well'.[155]

On 7 April 1874, in what was the start of a 'return rush', 200 disgruntled miners quit Cooktown on the SS *Lord Ashley,* bound for Townsville, claiming that the Palmer diggings would only support 1000

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152 Editorial in *The Brisbane Courier,* 12 March 1874, p. 2.

153 See, for example, *The Brisbane Courier,* 6 January 1874, p. 3 and 10 January 1874, p. 5.

154 Gold commissioner St George reported on 25 March that miners were leaving the Palmer at the rate of 50-80 per day: *The Brisbane Courier,* 15 April 1874,, p. 3.

155 See the letter from an unidentified correspondent in *The Brisbane Courier,* 27 April 1874, p. 3.

men.[156] On 10 April, an unruly group of about 600-700 ex-miners attempted to gain free passage out of Cooktown on the SS *Florence Irving* by rushing the gangplank; in the ensuing 'riot', the mate of the vessel was seriously injured and police were assaulted before arresting three of the ringleaders.[157] Once order was restored, 400 of the miners departed on the vessel. The Townsville correspondent of *The Brisbane Courier,* in reporting the incident, claimed that 'there are 4000 people at Cooktown waiting to return southwards'.[158]

Clearly, the Townsville correspondent's reporting of the numbers in Cooktown waiting to return southwards was grossly exaggerated, perhaps tenfold, and an example of the developing rivalry between the two townships. It is apparent also, however, that business and civic leaders in Cooktown recognised the effect that such adverse publicity would have on their settlement, as evidenced by the fact that from mid-April onwards, both *The Cooktown Courier* and *The Cooktown Herald and Palmer River Advertiser* inexplicably stopped reporting the number of persons departing Cooktown by ship. Moreover, from that time onwards, both newspapers started to run 'pro-Cooktown' editorials, actively promoting the viability of the settlement and scotching any rumours (often emanating from Townsville) that Cooktown was under threat.[159]

The reality was, however, that at least 1052 disgruntled miners shipped out of Cooktown in April 1874, followed by 437 in early May.[160] Moreover, another 500 or so men, 'penniless and destitute', remained in Cooktown unable to pay their fare south.[161] Although the numbers arriving in Cooktown were more than double the number of departures in April and May 1874, the adverse publicity generated by the 'return rush' of April 1874

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156 See *The Brisbane Courier,* 13 April 1874, p. 2. Twenty four men had left a week earlier on the *Victoria* and 40 on 2 April on the *Wonga Wonga:* as detailed in *CHPRA,* 1 April 1874 and 8 April 1874.

157 See the report of Inspector McKiernan on the incident in *The Brisbane Courier,* 15 April 1874, p. 3.

158 As reported in *The Brisbane Courier,* 14 April 1874, p. 2.

159 *The Cooktown Courier's* editorial of 22 April 1874, for example, rebutted the rumour that the settlement was likely to be removed to Princess Charlotte Bay: *The Cooktown Courier,* 22 April 1874, p. 2. The extent to which business and civic leaders subsequently 'talked up' the prospects of Cooktown is addressed in more detail in Chapter 7 'Boom to Bust'.

160 Figures compiled from passenger sailings reported in *The Brisbane Courier* from 1 April to 8 June 1874. It is possible that at least that number again may have quit Cooktown for other southern ports.

161 In the event, authorities in Cooktown subsequently paid the return fares of more than 600 men: see *CHPRA,* 10 June 1874, p. 2.

was certainly yet another factor in the Government's unwillingness to commit funds to the town.

Cooktown's Transition to a Township

At what point the Government finally decided to accept the reality of Cooktown's transition to a township, or at least a permanent settlement deserving of government support, is difficult to discern. The process by which it occurred is discussed in Chapter 4 'Tent City to Town' and, in a formal sense, Cooktown attained township status with its incorporation as a municipality in July 1876. In terms of the turning point in the transition, though, it could be argued that the Government's decision to send James Read to survey a site for the township in January 1874 was the critical event. On the other, it could be argued that it was arrival in late April 1874 of prefabricated buildings for a customs house and post office which marked the first real commitment by Government to the settlement.[162]

In terms of an event or incident at Cooktown itself, however, it probably was the successful auction of Crown land of 19 May 1874 which convinced the authorities in Brisbane that, in the minds of the residents of the town anyway, Cooktown had a viable future. At that auction, 135 of the 139 allotments offered for sale by the Government were purchased for a total price of £2938, almost three times the upset value.[163] Even though an editorial in *The Cooktown Herald and Palmer River Advertiser* asserted that much more would have been raised had the sale been held two months previously, 'when frontages to the main street [being sold privately] were fetching absurd prices', it seems that the Government was sufficiently heartened by the response to loosen its own purse strings.[164] Certainly, the expenditure by the Government of some £8200 on public works in Cooktown in the financial year 1874/75, against only £889 in 1873/74, would suggest that the turning point occurred after the inaugural land sale of May 1874.[165]

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162 That represented a committed expenditure, once constructed, of £889 in the financial year to 30 June 1874, the first public expenditure to appear against Cooktown: see *Queensland Government Gazette [QGG],* XV, 1874, p. 105 for the tender details.

163 See *List of Crown Lands Offered for Sale by Public Auction at Cooktown,* 18 May 1874, LAN/AB 27, QSA.

164 *CHPRA,* 20 May 1874, p. 3.

165 Figures compiled from various expenditure summaries in *QGG,* XVI, 1875 and XVII, 1876.

Putting 'An Uncertain Beginning' into Perspective

In many respects, Cooktown was probably no different to a host of other Australian coastal towns, established in the nineteenth century, which struggled in their formative years to attract recognition and funding from their respective colonial or state capital. An historical account of the early years of Cairns, Cardwell, Bowen, Coffs Harbour, Port Macquarie, Portland, Robe, Millicent, Albany, Esperance or Broome, for example, would likely bear striking similarities to many of the trials and tribulations of Cooktown.[166]

The major differences would be that most successful coastal towns, established in the late nineteenth century, had a good harbour, a suitable and contiguous site for a settlement, at least one viable primary industry either operating from the port or within their hinterland *and* good communication linkages both to their hinterland and their markets.

Cooktown, as has been argued in this chapter, compared favourably only in terms of its excellent harbour. Its site — selected primarily as a point of access for resupplying the Palmer River goldfields — had little to do with its suitability for settlement. Moreover, Cooktown had only one primary industry within its hinterland and that with an uncertain long-term viability. Finally, the communications linkages between Cooktown and its hinterland were tenuous, to say the least.

Cooktown was only ever going to flourish, therefore, if its main supporting industry flourished, namely the Palmer River and associated goldfields, or if it was able to diversify as a market outlet or processing or service centre for other industries or settlements. Obviously, it is easy to be wise with the benefit of hindsight. Later chapters, however, will argue that especially given Cooktown's 'uncertain beginning' and tenuous *raison d'être,* successive governments in Brisbane should have been far more critical in their assessment of Cooktown's viability and prospects, and — notwithstanding the hyperbole coming from certain business and civic leaders in Cooktown — should have detected the demise of the town years before they did.

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166 A comparative analysis between Cooktown and similar-sized coastal towns elsewhere in Queensland and Australia, albeit limited, is included in Chapter 8 'Conclusions'.

Before proceeding to that analysis, it would seem useful to examine the impact that the European settlement of Cooktown had on traditional Aboriginal society in the area between the Endeavour River and the Palmer River gold-fields.

CHAPTER 3 - THE COMING OF THE WHITE MAN

Aborigines rate barely a mention in typical earlier accounts of the history of Cooktown. Usually, they are mentioned only in terms of the hardships *they* inflicted on would-be miners travelling from Cooktown to the Palmer River goldfields. Indeed, most contemporary accounts of Aborigines in the early days of Cooktown centred either on their supposedly barbaric behaviour (the most favoured are their 'dastardly' attack on the defenceless Mary Watson — for whom a memorial still stands in Cooktown's main street — and their allegedly cannibalistic preference for Chinese), or *Boys Own* -type stories of their demise at the hands of 'heroic' white explorers and prospectors.

The reality was that 'the coming of the white man' to Cooktown, starting with Cook's visit in 1770 and culminating in the Palmer River rush of the early 1870s, probably resulted directly in the killing of around 190 able-bodied Aboriginal men, effectively 'gutting' two key generations from the seven tribal groups living astride the route between Cooktown and the Palmer River.[1] The loss of those 190 lives, however, together with probably another fifty or sixty men, women and children indiscriminately killed in the lust of battle, was only the beginning of the destruction of traditional Aboriginal society in the Cooktown-Palmer area.

Forced from their tribal areas and traditional lifestyles, probably two-thirds of the remaining 1700 or so Aborigines progressively succumbed over the following twenty years from exposure to European or Chinese diseases and ills (smallpox, TB, venereal diseases, pneumonia, alcoholism, opium addiction etc) or from starvation or malnutrition. By 1897, only twenty-five years after the first settlement by Europeans at Cooktown, the official statistic for the local Aboriginal population was under 100,[2] although this figure excludes young children in government reserves, and

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1 A more detailed account and discussion of Aboriginal deaths follows later in this chapter under the heading of 'The Balance Sheet of Losses'.

2 Based on the annual issue of blankets to Aborigines by the Government: see report of 'Measures recently adopted for the amelioration of the Aborigines', *Votes and proceedings of the Legislative Assembly of Queensland [QVP],* 2, 1897, p. 46. The total number of Aborigines was probably around 200-300.

the small number of Aborigines probably still clinging to a traditional lifestyle in the Cooktown hinterland.

The intensity of racial conflict in the Cooktown-Palmer area does, however, reinforce the modern view of a white 'invasion' of Australia, against the earlier notion (and legal doctrine) of *terra nullius*. It also makes a mockery of the seeming neglect of early historians to address (or even acknowledge) the issue of racial conflict, as well as the equally myopic view that

> settlement by the British has usually proceeded without much resistance. The blacks have kindly assisted in their dispossession ... submitting contentedly to indignation and oppression ... with gentleness and service.[3]

Notwithstanding such misrepresentations, it is equally clear that many of the contemporary accounts of racial conflict in the Cooktown-Palmer area were considerably exaggerated or distorted. On the jittery edge of a violent frontier, it is perhaps understandable that the report of an isolated clash between Aborigines and miners would often be transformed in the passage of its retelling to a more serious confrontation or a string of bloody encounters. Less understandable is why later writers would perpetuate such exaggerated accounts, with Holthouse in *River of gold*, for example, contending (with no apparent basis) that 'hundreds of Chinese and whole tribes of blacks were to die in the relentless fighting before the rush was over'.[4]

This chapter aims, therefore, to refute the more fanciful accounts of early race relations in the Cooktown area, including those relating to the violation of white women by Aborigines and of Chinese being strung up by their pigtails in Aboriginal 'kitchens', awaiting the cooking pot of their captors. More importantly, it addresses the underlying reasons for Aboriginal resistance to 'the coming of the white man' and differentiates between the impact on Aboriginal society of the early explorers against the

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3 J. Mathew, *Eaglehawk and crow: a study of the Australian Aboriginal*, Nutt, London, 1899, Preface.

4 H. Holthouse, *River of gold: the story of the Palmer River gold rush*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1967, p. 36.

more permanent (and pervasive) presence of later prospectors, miners and settlers.

What seems evident is that it was the explorers of Far North Queensland, rather than early white settlers or miners, who 'set the stage' for the frontier conflict which ultimately resulted in the demise of the Aboriginal people around Cooktown. It also seems likely that it was the unusually long period of intermittent contact in the area, spanning close to 100 years, which resulted in racial conflict as violent, and an Aboriginal response as purposeful, as perhaps anywhere else in Australia.

But did the settlement of Cooktown itself, or the passage of men and stock along a single, narrow track to the Palmer River (some 200 kilometres distant), really pose a serious threat to Aboriginal control of the region's natural resources? Was it not possible (with the admitted benefit of hindsight) that the two cultures could have existed side-by-side during the formative years of Cooktown? And given the rugged, almost impenetrable nature of the terrain inland from Cooktown, why did the Aboriginal groups astride the route to the Palmer continue to harass whites and Chinese who largely were only transiting their tribal lands?

Surely, it seems far-fetched to suggest that there could have been any collusion, in a tactical or strategic sense, between Aborigines from the Palmer River (who were certainly directly threatened by mining activities) and those who lived astride the supply line from Cooktown, notwithstanding that word of white activities would have been passed from group to group. Moreover, most of the notorious clashes occurred around Hell's Gate, midway between Cooktown and the Palmer, and presumably involved Aborigines whose best option would have been to allow the trespassers to pass unimpeded.

The explanation advanced in this chapter is that racial conflict in the Cooktown area needs to be seen in the context of a self-perpetuating but ultimately one-sided cycle of violence, exacerbated by the prevailing European notions of racial superiority and, from 'the other side of the frontier', by the relative vulnerability of white and Chinese trespassers to Aboriginal 'guerilla' tactics. The question which remains unanswered, perhaps to be taken up by an anthropologist, is why there never emerged an

Aboriginal guerilla-type leader, not least from the disaffected ranks of the Queensland Native Police Force.

The Aborigines of the Cooktown-Palmer River Region

The destruction of traditional Aboriginal society wrought by the coming of the white man to the Cooktown-Palmer River region has obviously made difficult an accurate assessment of the tribal groups, clans and moieties which existed in the area before 1770. Captain Cook saw only twenty-one Aborigines during his stay at the Endeavour River, comprising twelve men, seven women, one boy and a girl.[5] But as discussed earlier in Chapter 2, in the section headed 'The Original Inhabitants', it seems probable that the area within a twenty-kilometre radius of the Endeavour River sustained an Aboriginal population of around 250-300 people, made up of elements of three tribal groups.[6]

Interestingly, it is evident from Cook's description of visits to his ship by Aborigines on 10 July and 19 July 1770 that the local group moved freely between the north and south banks of the Endeavour River, suggesting that the river was not a tribal boundary.[7] At first glance, that tallies with the tribal designation and distribution classification used by Tindale, who portrayed (see Map 3.1 over) the local Aboriginal group as the Koko-Bujundi, with a territorial area from Rossville in the south, extending northwards some forty kilometres along the coast to a point about five kilometres *north* of the Endeavour River, and westwards some twenty kilometres inland to the Annan-Normanby Divide.[8] Further north, according to Tindale, was the tribal area of the Koko-Imudji, extending some fifty kilometres along the coast almost to Cape Flattery and inland some forty kilometres almost to the infamous Battle Camp.[9]

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5 See J. Hawkesworth, *An account of the voyages undertaken by order of his present Majesty for making discoveries in the Southern Hemisphere,* Vol. 4, Strahan and Cadell, London, 1783, p. 205.

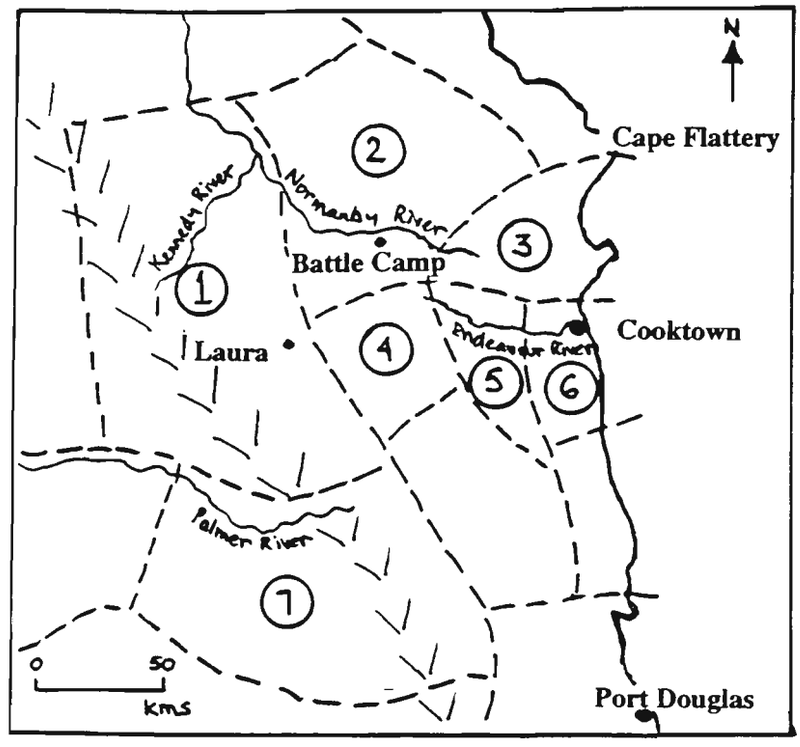
6 That assessment, which was attributed in Chapter 2 to B.F. Craig and A.P. Elkin, is corroborated by R.M.W. Dixon, 'Tribes, languages and other boundaries in Northeast Queensland' in N. Peterson (ed.), *Tribes and boundaries in Australia,* Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1976, p. 207.

7 See A.W. Reed (ed.), *Captain Cook in Australia,* Reed, Sydney, 1969, pp. 94 and 98.

8 N.B. Tindale, *Aboriginal tribes of Australia,* ANU Press, Canberra, 1974, Map 'Australia NE Sheet'.

9 Tindale, *Aboriginal tribes*, Map 'Australia NE Sheet'.

Map 3.1 - The Designation and Distribution of Aboriginal Groups in the Cooktown-Palmer River Region



1. Koko-jawa
2. Koko-wara
3. Koko-imudji
4. Koko-walandja
5. Koko-bididji
6. Koko-bujundi
7. Koko-jelandi

Source: N.B. Tindale, *Aboriginal tribes of Australia*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1974, Map 'Australia NE Sheet'.

Several other anthropologists, though, seem to differ with Tindale, both over names and tribal areas. Davidson, for example, contended in an earlier study that the tribal area around the Endeavour River belonged to the Koko-Yimoji (with the clans Kai-ar-a at Mount Cook and Koko-Yalyu at Grassy Hill).[10] Equally perplexing was the description by Craig in 1967 of the group to the north of the Endeavour River as the Gugu-Jimidir and the southern group as the Gugu-Njunngal.[11] Local historians have similarly confused the issue, with Woolston talking of the Gogo-Yimidir tribe and

10 See D.S. Davidson, *A preliminary register of Australian tribes and hordes*, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, 1938, p. 52.

11 See B.F. Craig, *Cape York: occasional papers in Aboriginal studies Number 9*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1967, Map Y.

Trezise asserting that the group around Cooktown (and some 100 kilometres to the west) was the Gugu-Imudji![12]

In part, the explanation would seem to lie in pronunciation, either as a result of anthropologists interpreting the Aboriginal language or because of local variations within and between neighbouring groups or clans. The prefix *Koko,* for example, which designates a total of twelve tribal groups in the area between Cape Flattery and Port Douglas, and inland to the Palmer River, can alternatively be written in English as *Gogo* or *Gugu.* Similarly, Aboriginal clans of the Koko-Imudji around Cape Flattery pronounce their tribal name as Koko-Yimidir, while clans near the Endeavour River pronounce it as Koko-Jimoji.[13]

Taking the two local groups to the north and south of the Endeavour River as an example, it can be seen from Table 3.1 below that many of the apparent inconsistencies over tribal names are largely differences over pronunciation.[14]

Table 3.1 - Alternative Pronunciations for Aboriginal Groups in the Cooktown Area
(less the prefix Koko or an alternative spelling)

Researcher	South of the Endeavour River	North of the Endeavour River
Tindale	Bujundi	Imudji
Davidson	not known	Yimoji
Craig	Njunngal	Jimidir
Woolston	not known	Yimidir
Trezise	not known	Imudji
Other	Nyungal	Jimoji
Other	Bulanji	Yimidjir

Differences over the delineation of tribal areas are less easy to explain, particularly in relation to groups in the vicinity of Cooktown itself.

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12 See F.P. Woolston, 'The Gogo-Yimidir people and the Endeavour', *Queensland Heritage*, 2, May 1970, pp. 12-22 and P.J. Trezise, *Last days of a wilderness*, Collins, Sydney, 1973, p. 33.

13 See Tindale, *Aboriginal tribes,* p. 176.

14 The same exercise for the other five groups named in Map 3.1 at page 94 would reveal similar differences over pronunciation.

The most obvious explanation is that Tindale was wrong, at least in his map as reproduced at Map 3.1 at page 94, in portraying the tribal area of the Koko-Bujundi as including the eventual site of Cooktown and the northern banks of the Endeavour River. Indeed, in the accompanying text he designated the main location of the Koko-Bujundi as the Annan River (eight kilometres south of Cooktown) and the main location of the Koko-Imudji as 'from Endeavour River (Cooktown) north to ...'.[15]

That would tend to suggest that the tribal boundary between the Koko-Bujundi and the Koko-Imudji was not the Endeavour River itself, but probably Mount Cook some five kilometres to the south. That delineation would also help explain why the Aborigines seen by Cook — probably Koko-Imudji — were able to frequent both sides of the Endeavour River, a situation not easily explicable had the river indeed been a tribal boundary.

The Traditional Aboriginal Lifestyle

As discussed earlier in Chapter 2, Aborigines in pre-colonial Australia not only had clearly-defined tribal areas but their movement within such areas was purposeful and dictated by the seasonal availability of food, as well as social and ceremonial demands. In the relatively-fertile land around Cooktown, the need for mobility was less than in the more open, unproductive areas further inland.[16] As a generalisation, the movement patterns of the Aborigines of coastal Far North Queensland were more often dictated by the climate, with groups tending to travel 'to the tablelands during the wet season [when the coastal flats were hot, humid and insect-ridden] and descend to the coast in winter', providing they could access an adequate supply of fresh water.[17]

Against such seasonal movements were the advantages of remaining close to the sea-shore. During his stay at the Endeavour River, Captain Cook observed local Aborigines in 'a small wooden canoe with

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15 See Tindale, *Aboriginal tribes,* p. 176. See also the map in J. and L. Haviland, 'How much food will there be in heaven? Lutherans and Aborigines around Cooktown to 1900', *Aboriginal History,* 4, 2, 1980, p. 118 showing the tribal area of the Guugu Yimidhirr extending from the Annan River almost to Cape Flattery, and westwards almost to Battle Camp.

16 See Tindale, *Aboriginal tribes,* pp. 111-2.

17 Dixon, 'Tribes, languages and other boundaries', p. 210.

outriggers, in which they seem'd to be employed striking fish', although he thought that they would not 'dare venture ... far out at sea in such a vessel'.[18] Joseph Banks, however, on a brief excursion to Lizard Island (some thirty kilometres off Cape Flattery) found clear evidence of periodic visits by mainland Aborigines in the form of 'seven or eight frames of [since deserted] huts', a finding he appears not to have passed on to Cook.[19]

Cook also observed several Aborigines wearing 'Necklaces made of Shells, which they seem'd to Value, as they would not part with them'.[20] But he saw no evidence that the coastal Aborigines regularly harvested oysters, clams or other shellfish 'for if they did we must have seen of these ... shells on shore about their fire places'.[21] Again, Joseph Banks provides a contradictory observation, noting that 'we saw near their fire places plentifull [sic] remains of lobsters, shell fish of all kinds and ... sea squirts'.[22] Banks noted in his journal that 'for food they seem to depend very much tho' not intirely [sic] upon the sea'.[23]

Both Cook and Banks nevertheless agreed that the locals appreciated turtle meat. The altercation between Cook's crew and a group of Aborigines on 19 July 1770, in which 'a Musquet loaded with small Shott [sic] [was fired] at one of the Ring leaders', was over the issue of the Aborigines attempting to carry off two (of the twelve) turtles the crew had caught the previous day.[24] Unrelated to that incident, Cook noted that a turtle caught several days later had the remnants of a wooden harpoon still embedded in its shell, evidence to his mind 'that they strike Turtle, I suppose at the Time they come ashore to lay their Eggs, for they certainly have no boat fit to do this at Sea, or that will carry a turtle'.[25]

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18 Reed, *Captain Cook,* pp. 92 and 94.

19 See J.C. Beaglehole (ed.), *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks 1768-1771,* Vol. 2, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1962, p. 103. It is acknowledged that Cape Flattery is some seventy kilometres to the north of the Endeavour River and that the clans around Cooktown may not have been as sea-going as their northern neighbours.

20 Reed, *Captain Cook,* p. 97.

21 Reed, *Captain Cook,* p. 92.

22 Beaglehole, *Joseph Banks,* p. 127.

23 Beaglehole, *Joseph Banks,* p. 126.

24 Reed, *Captain Cook,* p. 98. The incident is discussed in more detail later in this chapter under the heading of 'Early Contact with White Explorers'.

25 Reed, *Captain Cook,* p. 99.

It seems reasonably apparent, therefore, that at least some of the coastal clans depended in part on access to the sea for their livelihood, although it is unclear what proportion of the Aborigines from the two coastal groups about the Endeavour River regularly made use of marine resources. For those who did, such dependence would have further reduced their need for mobility and, indeed, had probably resulted — over a period of many generations — in the gradual contraction of the overall size of their traditional tribal area.[26] Importantly, clans with smaller tribal areas

> are more defensive in attitude, fearing others who may usurp their territory and tend to hold closely to their own limited territories.[27]

Coping with Intruders

Despite the obvious difficulties faced by twentieth-century anthropologists in delineating tribal boundaries in the Cooktown-Palmer River region, no such uncertainties would have existed within traditional Aboriginal societies. The limits of a tribal area — usually delineated in a relatively-fertile region, such as Far North Queensland, by a geographic feature like a river or divide — were effectively barriers which as a rule could only be crossed on pain of death.[28]

Tindale contends that 'trespass was a crime ... defined [in traditional Aboriginal society] as greater than woman-stealing and even greater than the evil doings and magical practices of clever men'.[29] In practical terms, anyone trespassing on tribal areas

> was looked upon as an intruder and would be called upon to give an account of himself and unless he was

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26 Tindale asserts that a position on the sea-shore 'seems to afford a territorial advantage of a factor between three and four': Tindale, *Aboriginal tribes,* pp. 111-2. It is interesting to note that of the twelve Koko-groups in his catalogue, the Koko-Bujundi (and another coastal group around Port Douglas) have the smallest tribal areas by far: Tindale, *Aboriginal tribes,* pp. 176-7.

27 Tindale, *Aboriginal tribes,* p. 11.

28 In more open, less fertile areas the boundaries were often not so clearly delineated and may, for example, be a small plain: Dixon, 'Tribes, languages and other boundaries', p. 210.

29 N.B. Tindale, 'Some ecological bases for Australian tribal boundaries' in Peterson, *Tribes and boundaries,* p. 18.

> accredited as a messanger or herald would pay the penalty most likely with his life.[30]

Such drastic action was reportedly in prospect even where a period of friendly encounter between contiguous tribal units had resulted in a number of intertribal marriages.[31]

Against that background, the coming of the white man — in the form of sea-borne and land explorers — added a totally new dimension to the traditional concept of trespass. In some cases, Aboriginal groups seem to have persisted in regarding Europeans as possible friends, at least until they knew otherwise from experience.[32] In other cases, white men were initially believed to be the reincarnations of departed relatives or tribal enemies, thereby inspiring a probable mix of awe, fear and uncertainty.[33] On balance, it seems that many Aborigines, including those around the Endeavour River, initially treated early European trespassers with greater consideration than would have been accorded strange blacks who attempted to intrude upon their tribal lands.[34]

Indeed, the initial and typical response of many Aboriginal groups was often a genuine attempt to involve whites in the Aboriginal system of reciprocity, which was central to the social organisation and ethical standards of traditional society.[35] Unfortunately for both sides, the system of reciprocity — which involved the concept of sharing and the reciprocal exchange of gifts or services — was often not known of, misused or exploited by the white trespassers.

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30 Edward Palmer quoted by Tindale, *Aboriginal tribes,* p. 77. See also Dixon, Tribes, languages and other boundaries', p. 214.

31 Tindale in *Tribes and boundaries*, p. 17.

32 See C.D. Rowley, *The destruction of Aboriginal society,* Penguin, Ringwood, 1972, p. 159.

33 As discussed in Chapter 2 under 'The First White Visitors'.

34 See H. Reynolds, *The other side of the frontier: Aboriginal resistance to the European invasion of Australia,* Penguin, Ringwood, 1982, p. 39.

35 See H. Reynolds, 'The other side of the frontier' in H. Reynolds (ed.), *Race relations in North Queensland,* James Cook University of North Queensland, Townsville, 1978, p. 9.

Early Contact with White Explorers

Mention has already been made of the probability that Malay fishermen and traders visited the Gulf of Carpentaria from as early as the sixteenth century, giving rise to the prospect that some ventured occasionally down the eastern shores of Cape York Peninsula.[36] Notwithstanding the possibility that Malays or even the Dutch may have put into the Endeavour River before him, Cook's enforced stop-over from 14 June to 4 August 1770, as he effected major repairs to his ship, remains the first documented visit by outsiders to the area.[37]

In terms of later race relations, the significant occurrence during Cook's visit was the clash with local Aborigines on 19 July 1770 over the issue of reciprocity, stemming from Cook's disinclination to share captured turtles. The background to that clash was that a week earlier, the crew had presented gifts of cloth, nails, paper and fish to four Aborigines who came out to the ship.[38] The next day, the Aborigines reciprocated with the gift of a small fish, the symbolism of which was obviously missed by Cook and his crew, with Banks noting that 'they readily received the things we gave them but never would understand our signs when we askd [sic] for returns'.[39] The crew's acceptance of the single fish, however, most likely led the Aborigines to believe that Cook and his men appreciated the system of reciprocity.

When Cook then refused to share twelve newly-captured large turtles (their cross-loading from small boats to the ship would have been clearly visible from the shore), the Aborigines were understandably mystified.[40] At first, the Aborigines attempted to obtain a share through negotiation. When that failed they tried simply to take two of the turtles.

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36 See also the discussion in L. Whitehouse, *The northern approaches: Australia in old maps,* Boolarong, Brisbane, 1994, p. 80 of the map by Father Ricci in 1602, suggesting Spanish exploration of the north-east Queensland coast circa 1590-1600.

37 Although Cook was understandably preoccupied with overseeing the repairs to his ship and making preparations to resume his expedition, Joseph Banks made extensive journal entries of his observations ashore, including a comprehensive description of the local Aborigines (which takes up fifteen pages of Beaglehole's edited version of his journal): see Beaglehole, *Joseph Banks,* pp. 122-37.

38 Reed, *Captain Cook,* p. 94.

39 Beaglehole, *Joseph Banks,* p. 125.

40 For an account of the incident, see Reed, *Captain Cook,* pp. 98-9.

In the ensuing altercation, the Aborigines set fire to dry grass near a shore encampment, killing one of the ship's pigs. Cook responded with musket fire, wounding one Aborigine.

From 'the other side of the frontier', therefore, Cook's visit most likely found its way into Aboriginal folklore — both locally and passed by word of mouth to other groups — in terms of a group of strange trespassers who, although they presented no particular threat to the traditional Aboriginal lifestyle, were unwilling to share their belongings or food supplies and, indeed, resorted to violence to protect their material possessions. It was perhaps not unexpected then that forty years later, during the second recorded visit of Europeans to the Endeavour River, the crew of the *Mermaid* (under Lieutenant Phillip King) also clashed with Aborigines over the issue of reciprocity.[41] In that incident, on 2 July 1819, spears were thrown and shots fired after a group of Aborigines took a 'violent fancy' to clothes being washed onshore by the sailors.

The journals of later explorers and prospectors abound with further examples of the exploitation or misuse of reciprocity (or perhaps simply the failure of whites even to think of their behaviour in terms of reciprocity). The Jardine brothers, for example, on their trek along the western side of Cape York Peninsula in November 1864 'breakfasted off some opossums from a hurriedly-deserted blacks' camp'.[42] Similarly, the prospector James Venture Mulligan noted in his diary on 13 June 1875 that his party 'came upon a blacks' camp ... [and] got a number of large spears, boomerangs ... and several other nic-nacs'.[43]

Other explorers, notably Ludwig Leichhardt, claimed in their defence that they never took anything from the Aborigines 'without giving something in return'.[44] Nevertheless, it is evident from Leichhardt's journal that his party frequently mis-appropriated Aboriginal property without

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41 For an account of the incident, albeit from a white perspective, see R.L. Jack, *Northmost Australia,* Vol. 1, Robertson, Melbourne, 1922, p. 149.

42 F.J. Byerley (ed.), *Narrative of the overland expedition of the Messrs Jardine,* Buxton, Brisbane, 1867, p. 16.

43 J.V. Mulligan, 'Expedition in search of gold and other minerals in the Palmer Districts by Mulligan and party, *QVP,* 1, 1876, p. 9.

44 L. Leichhardt, *Journal of an overland expedition in Australia,* Boone, London, 1847, p. 28.

recompense, or bartered items which likely had no reciprocal value within Aboriginal society, the classic being a 'bright shining penny' in payment for two appropriated calabashes.[45]

A number of explorers — including Leichhardt — also did not even include in their provisions any legitimate articles of barter, probably reflecting the prevailing conviction that Aborigines would not (or could not) comprehend the 'civilised' concept of barter. In the latter stages of his expedition, Leichhardt secreted a number of negotiable items (unwanted gun barrels and surplus horse-shoes) rather than allow the local Aborigines to have them.[46]

So it is unsurprising that over the space of a number of decades and with intermittent but increasing contact with white explorers and prospectors, Aborigines became disenchanted with what they would have seen as a rejection by Europeans of their traditional system of reciprocity. Their common response — often as a symbolic rejection of the European's concept of materialism, or in an attempt to enforce the concept of reciprocity — was to engage in the pilfering of white possessions, whenever the opportunity presented.[47] Contemporary European commentators were quick to cite the prevalence of pilfering by Aborigines as a deficiency of character.[48] But Joseph Banks' observation that the Aborigines he had dealings with 'never once attempted to take any thing in a clandestine manner' would support Reynolds' contention that pilfering was a deliberate and reactive response to the continuing abuse of reciprocity by whites.[49]

The unfortunate but predictable outcome was that whites, as they had elsewhere in Australia, responded in turn with harsher counter-measures. The explorer John Oxley, for example, decided on 27 September 1824 to make an example of Aborigines pilfering his camp and shot one of them, noting in his journal that 'events of this nature are sure to be

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45 Leichhardt, *Journal of an expedition,* p. 162.

46 Leichhardt, *Journal of an expedition,* pp. 150 and 320.

47 Reynolds contends that 'to the Aborigines, European possessiveness was morally obnoxious': see Reynolds, 'The other side', p. 56.

48 As cited in Reynolds, 'The other side', p. 56.

49 Beaglehole, *Joseph Banks*, p. 125.

communicated from tribe to tribe'.[50] Similarly, Ludwig Leichhardt noted on 20 July 1845 that a group of Aborigines were observing his camp and ordered one of his men 'to discharge his gun, in order to drive them away'.[51]

Other explorers also used their horses to intimidate would-be pilferers. F.T. Gregory in Western Australia noted in his journal on 18 May 1858 that 'four of us suddenly ... charged them at the full gallop. This harmless manoeuvre had the desired effect ... [with several nearly] being trodden under-foot'.[52] Leichhardt also used his horses on several occasions to 'disperse' groups of Aborigines.[53] Nearer to Cooktown, William Hann and his party on 17 September 1872 drove their horses at a group of Aborigines who had approached his camp seeking back a young boy kidnapped by Hann's men.[54] As for the use of firearms, one can but speculate as to whether the circumstances necessitated such intimidation.

It is also evident that the explorers abused the system of reciprocity over the issue of sexual relations with Aboriginal women. Such subjects were offensive to Victorian (and racial) morality and, although there are isolated incidents recorded, it is a topic generally avoided in the journals of the explorers. A.C. Gregory's party in Western Australia in October 1848 offended a group of Aborigines by declining their offer of sexual relations:

> The women commenced pelting the party with stones, apparently in revenge for the refusal of certain courteous invitations, which perhaps are the greatest marks of politeness which they think it possible to offer to strangers.[55]

On a number of occasions, however, it is apparent that the explorers were not so remiss. When Gilbert was left in charge of Leichhardt's party on

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50 See J.G. Steele, *The explorers of the Moreton Bay District 1770-1830,* Queensland University Press, Brisbane, 1972, pp. 148-9.

51 Leichhardt, *Journal of an expedition,* p. 456.

52 A.C. Gregory, *Journals of Australian explorations,* Beal, Brisbane, 1884, p. 44.

53 For example, see Leichhardt, *Journal of an expedition,* p. 150.

54 Jack, *Northmost Australia,* Vol. 2, p. 396.

55 Gregory, *Australian explorations,* p. 25. Reynolds notes that 'young women ... were frequently dispatched ... to appease ... the strange and threatening white men': see Reynolds, 'The other side', p. 18.

18 January 1845, the explorers were offered the 'use of women' and one member of the party noted in his journal that 'the travellers had some gin'.[56]

A certain mystery surrounds the subsequent death of Gilbert in June 1845. Leichhardt's journal entry describes the attack by Aborigines upon the camp and contends that the attack was the culmination of an earlier attempt by Aborigines to steal their bullocks.[57] Chisholm, though, contends that the attack was in retaliation for the sexual mis-treatment of a native woman by the expedition's Aboriginal guides.[58] Reading back through Leichhardt's journal, one notes a number of previous occasions when the guides were absent from the camp for inexplicable and prolonged periods and one can but speculate as to their whereabouts and companions.[59] In summary, while it is appreciated that a number of Aboriginal tribes may have offered their women to explorers, most likely as a form of appeasement, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that sexual relations between expeditions and Aborigines resulted in the further aggravation of race relations.[60]

What emerges from the preceding discussion is that it was largely the explorers of Far North Queensland who 'set the stage' for the racial conflict which ultimately was to result in the destruction of traditional Aboriginal society in the Cooktown-Palmer area. In contrast to many other 'frontiers' in Australia, where it was the settlers who were responsible for dispossessing Aborigines of their land and livelihood, it seems that an escalating cycle of racial conflict was well underway in Far North Queensland even before the first white settler set foot ashore at the future site of Cooktown.

The unfortunate irony is that explorers, as opposed to prospectors, miners and settlers, *should* have posed no direct threat to the Aboriginal people (other than as the advance party of the spread of 'civilisation'). The fact that explorers *did* pose a direct threat to the Aborigines of Far North Queensland, over the space of 100 years, explains in part why later racial

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56 Leichhardt, *Journal of an expedition,* p. 162.
57 Leichhardt, *Journal of an expedition,* pp. 305-6.
58 A.H. Chisholm, *Strange new world,* Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1941, pp. 271-2.
59 Leichhardt, *Journal of an expedition,* pp. 157-8, 295 and 385.
60 See Reynolds, 'The other side', p. 57.

conflict involving miners and settlers was arguably more violent than anywhere else in Australia. Had the Aborigines been able to foresee the eventual consequences of the incursions by these white explorers, their response would undoubtedly have been far different.

> The strange men on horses ... sewing the seeds of death ... would have been speared ... as they rode along.[61]

Exploitation on the Sea Frontier

Overlapping the two sequential periods of early contact with European explorers and the influx of miners and settlers from the early 1870s was another, equally violent but often unreported period of racial conflict on the sea frontier, centred on the *bêche-de-mer* and pearl-shelling industries.[62] While both industries were based primarily on Thursday Island, Cooktown was an important port for the *bêche-de-mer* trade, with thirteen boats employing over 450 men operating from the Endeavour River in the mid 1870s.[63]

It seems likely that Aboriginal groups around the Endeavour River had contact with *bêche-de-mer* fishermen from as early as the 1850s.[64] The *bêche-de-mer* fishing station at Three Isles (thirty-five kilometres north-east of Cooktown) was already well established by the time the first settlers arrived at Cooktown in October 1873, with Dalrymple noting in his journal that 'the settlement of this new district [around the Endeavour River] will stimulate the valuable pearl-shell, *bêche-de-mer* and turtle fisheries along this coast'.[65] Given that the industry required a large supply of cheap labour to gather the *bêche-de-mer* (by wading or diving from

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61 C.D. Cotton, *Ludwig Leichhardt and the Great South Land,* Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1938, p. 212.

62 For a detailed account of that conflict in Far North Queensland, see Chapter 5 'The sea frontier' in N.A. Loos, *Invasion and resistance,* ANU Press, Canberra, 1982, pp. 118-59.

63 See G.C. Bolton, *A thousand miles away: a history of Queensland to 1920,* Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1963, p. 76. By the late 1880s, the number of boats had increased to close to thirty: see Loos, *Invasion and resistance,* p. 118.

64 Vessels from Sydney were involved in the *bêche-de-mer* trade in the Torres Strait in the 1840s and exploiting the Barrier Reef during the 1860s: see Loos, *Invasion and resistance,* p. 118.

65 G.E. Dalrymple, 'Narrative and reports of the Queensland North-East Coast Expedition 1873', *QVP,* 1, 1874, pp. 636 and 650.

offshore reefs during low tides), it seems probable that mainland Aborigines from around the Endeavour River were being 'pressed' into the industry from the 1860s.

The difficulty in quantifying the above assertion is that early commentators did not always differentiate between mainland Aborigines, Torres Strait Islanders and South Sea Islanders.[66] Dalrymple, for example, on his visit to Three Isles on 31 October 1873 noted in his journal that 'most of the employees are Kanakas, healthy, happy-looking and fat'.[67] But it is not clear from his description whether Dalrymple could differentiate between Kanakas (the term usually applied to South Sea Islanders) and mainland Aborigines; alternatively, his terminology that 'most' were Kanakas may mean that some were Aborigines.

The other explanation is that Dalrymple only saw the curing station on the main island, which typically would have been manned by the higher-skilled Torres Strait and South Sea Islanders, while mainland Aborigines (or 'Binghis' as they were called) would have been employed in the more menial task of gathering on the outer islands.[68] Some twenty years later, the first protector of Aborigines in North Queensland, Walter Roth, estimated that about 300 Aborigines were employed in the *bêche-de-mer* industry.[69] His estimate did not include either those Aborigines illegally pressed into service or women and children, whose combined numbers even then would probably have almost equalled his official estimate.[70]

Nevertheless, by the late 1880s and early 1890s many of the worst excesses in relation to the employment of Aborigines in the industry had already transpired, with Roth noting in one of his early reports that

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66 See Loos, *Invasion and resistance,* p. 122 who notes that 'one is left wondering ... whether they have taken ... [mainland Aborigines] into consideration at all'.

67 Dalrymple, 'Narrative', p. 637.

68 See Loos, *Invasion and resistance,* p. 123.

69 See W.E. Roth to Commissioner of Police, 6 May 1898, in-letter 6944 of 1898, COL/142, Queensland State Archies (QSA).

70 See Loos, *Invasion and resistance,* p. 123 who asserts that 'there must have been a significantly larger number working in the fisheries' over and above Roth's estimate.

> the whole story of this *bêche-de-mer* trade which, until my arrival ... I could scarcely have credited, is one long record of brutal cruelty, bestiality and debauchery.[71]

Fifteen years earlier, in 1877, the Police Magistrate at Cardwell was reporting to Brisbane four recent incidents of Aborigines being kidnapped and forced to work in the industry, while the Police Magistrate at Cooktown was informing the Colonial Secretary that 'this forcible carrying away of gins is the cause of much of the ill feeling existing towards whites'.[72]

There is also considerable evidence to suggest that hundreds of Aborigines along the coast between Cardwell and Somerset were kidnapped and forced to work in the industry in the 1870s. Often, the men were literally stranded on a remote island or reef and forced to gather *bêche-de-mer* in return for the barest supply of food and water, while the women were kept at the main base for the sexual use of the white overseers and their underlings.[73] Their day-to-day living conditions were often pitiful and

> those that get sick die ... and they all live the hardest possible life, generally on the verge of starvation and frequently in want of water.[74]

By the early 1880s, the incidences of kidnapping had declined, being gradually replaced by a more complex labour trade, albeit that the emerging multi-racial relationship between Europeans and Aborigines 'was still one of coloniser and colonised, superior and inferior racial castes'.[75] In simplistic terms, the labour trade became one based on the whites' need for Aboriginal labour (and their sexual dependency on Aboriginal women) while, for many young Aborigines, employment in the fisheries industry

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71 See W.E. Roth letter dated 4 February 1884, 'Typescript copies of reports of W.E.Roth at Cooktown 1898', COL/139, QSA.

72 See Brinsley Sheridan, 'Reserves for Aboriginals, Cardwell District' in *QVP,* 2, 1877, p. 1245 and Howard St George to Colonial Secretary, 3 March 1882, in-letter 1385 of 1882, COL/A333, QSA.

73 See R. Evans, 'Harlots and helots: exploitation of the Aboriginal remnant' in R. Evans *et al, Exclusion, exploitation and extermination: race relations in colonial Queensland,* ANZ Book Company, Sydney, 1975, p. 105.

74 See W.E. Parry-Okeden (Commissioner of Police), 'Report on the North Queensland Aborigines and the Native Police', *QVP,* 2, 1897, p. 35.

75 N. Loos, 'A chapter of contact: Aboriginal - European relations in North Queensland 1606-1992' in Reynolds, *Race relations*, p. 19. See also the discussion of working conditions in N.A. Loos, 'Queensland's Kidnapping Act: The Native Labourers Protection Act of 1884', *Aboriginal History,* 4, 2, June 1980, pp. 150-73.

offered 'a new, if often unpredictable, social and economic security'.[76] Eventually, the rough and crude culture of the sea frontier was largely subsumed by the paternalistic bureaucracy of white 'civilisation'.[77]

The point of this discussion, however, has not been to focus on the partial acculturation of certain coastal Aborigines into a fringe society on the sea frontier. Rather, it reinforces the argument of the spiralling cycle of violence which confronted local Aboriginal groups around the Endeavour River. Even before the first European settler arrived on their shores, they had been forced to contend not only with a string of explorers but also with the very real threat posed by whites in the *bêche-de-mer* industry, frequently bent on kidnapping the cream of their young men and women.

In practical terms, the coastal Aborigines who had traditionally based their livelihood on fishing and the utilisation of other marine resources would have become loath to venture far off-shore or, indeed, to linger too long near the coast itself for fear of capture. Moreover, foraging further inland in pursuit of alternative food sources would have involved encroaching on the traditional areas of other clans, thereby restricting their available food sources. The probable consequence is that by the time the first white settlers arrived at the Endeavour River, both the Koko-Bujundi and the Koko-Imudji had become increasingly defensive in attitude and increasingly determined to protect their shrinking resource areas.

The Arrival of Miners and Settlers

The initial lodgement by Howard St George and A.C. Macmillan and their men on the southern banks of the Endeavour River in late October 1873 probably had no great impact on the one or two clans of the Koko-Imudji who frequented that area. The early settlement occupied an area of less than one square kilometre and was in an exposed locality which the local clans probably avoided, through fear of kidnap by white *bêche-de-mer* fishermen. Moreover, there was practically no movement by the early settlers into the coastal fringe north of the Endeavour River, which was the tribal area of the bulk of the Koko-Imudji.

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76 Loos, *Invasion and resistance,* p. 154.

77 See Loos, *Invasion and resistance*, p. 159.

Of more concern to the local clans would have been the small-scale exploration parties which, almost immediately after the first landing, ventured into the countryside surrounding the new settlement. On Monday 27 October 1873, two days after their arrival at the Endeavour River, St George and Macmillan rode some ten kilometres to the south, almost to the Annan River.[78] The next day, Macmillan and a small group of men set out for a two-day exploratory push into the hinterland, penetrating westwards some thirty-five kilometres and 'finding an excellent route through several Gaps to the foot of the ... Main Range'.[79] Another group, under the command of Lieutenant Connor RN, took a small boat some twenty-five kilometres up the Endeavour River noting that 'fresh tracks of blacks were seen, but for reasons best known to themselves they kept away'.[80]

To the local Aborigines, these exploration parties were probably perceived as a direct threat, either in the context of Connor's group being seen as marauding *bêche-de-mer* fishermen, intent on kidnap, or Macmillan's group as a follow-up to Hann's party, which a year earlier had kidnapped a young Aboriginal boy from the Koko-Wara tribe in the vicinity of what was later to be named Battle Camp.[81] The activities of these small-scale exploration parties probably had very little effect on native game or other Aboriginal food sources. But the appropriation upriver by Connor's party of 'a canoe with outriggers, made of red cedar, a very superior craft' would have done nothing to ease the fear of local Aborigines that this was yet another group of trespassing whites, bent at best on the abuse of reciprocity.[82]

In the meantime, 200 kilometres to the west, a flood of white prospectors and would-be miners was pushing north from Georgetown and the Etheridge River into the headwaters of the Palmer River, separated from Cooktown by the Great Dividing Range. James Venture Mulligan, one of the first prospectors into the area, reported that

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78 As reported in *The Brisbane Courier,* 13 November 1873, p. 2.

79 See A.C. Macmillan to the Secretary for Works, 30 October 1873, in-letter 4598/73 of 1873, WOR/A74, QSA.

80 As reported in *The Brisbane Courier,* 29 November 1873, p. 6.

81 For an account of that incident on 17 September 1872, see Jack, *Northmost Australia,* Vol. 2, p. 396.

82 As reported in *The Brisbane Courier,* 29 November 1873, p. 6.

> on the first evening the party camped on the Palmer ... [we] saw a number of ... [Aborigines] in the neighbourhood, who set fire to the grass, threw stones down a range and brandished their spears.[83]

As hundreds of European miners spread throughout the area, the wandering, fossicking nature of their operations scared off native game, while their panning and sluicing for alluvial gold proved ruinous to Aboriginal fishing holes — a situation which surely would have been conveyed to neighbouring groups. A visiting correspondent noted that the local Aborigines 'do not like being put off their fishing grounds on the river and are determined to keep possession of the back ... gullies'.[84]

Moreover, because the prospectors and miners usually operated alone, or in small groups, and often scattered over wide areas, they were vulnerable to Aboriginal retaliation.[85] Howard St George, in one of his early reports from the Palmer, noted that 'the back gullies have not as yet been prospected, as the blacks drive the miners in from them'.[86] A correspondent to one of the local Cooktown newspapers later noted that 'the most successful [prospectors] were those with good ... arms and horses [who] were able to proceed 30 to 40 miles' at a time.[87]

Against that background, it is hardly surprising that the 100-man party of St George and Macmillan, which left Cooktown on 31 October 1873 bound for the Palmer, was to clash heavily with Aborigines on at least three occasions en route.[88] It is evident, though, that the severity of those clashes — which were the unfortunate precursors to a series of similar clashes over the following three or four years — was played down at the time, as was any discussion of which party initiated them.

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83 As reported in *The Brisbane Courier,* 18 October 1873, p. 6.

84 See *The Brisbane Courier,* 13 December 1873, p. 5.

85 See N. Kirkman, 'The Palmer River goldfield' in K.H. Kennedy (ed.), *Readings in North Queensland mining history,* Vol. 1, James Cook University Townsville, 1980, p. 124.

86 As reported in *The Brisbane Courier,* 27 November 1873, p. 2.

87 See *The Cooktown Herald and Palmer River Advertiser (CHPRA),* 29 April 1874, p. 2.

88 Local Aborigines had no way of knowing that the party of whites was headed for the Palmer, but could reasonably have assumed that it had some hostile intent towards them.

Neither St George nor Macmillan, for example, even mentioned the clashes in their respective reports to Brisbane, with St George merely noting that 'blacks numerous and hostile on way up'.[89] The correspondent to the *Cleveland Bay Express,* who accompanied the expedition, similarly noted only that 'twice they attacked us, and once the black troopers had a skirmish with them'.[90]

When it became public knowledge that a major clash had occurred at Battle Camp, with considerable loss of Aboriginal lives, the Government felt compelled to hold a public enquiry in Cooktown.[91] One witness, William Webb, informed the enquiry that 'some blacks were shot [near the Normanby River on 3 November]. I do not know why, as they had not interfered with us.'[92] Despite such evidence, and the admission that 'whenever the black troopers came across ... [Aborigines] they made short work of them', the enquiry decided that St George and Macmillan and their men had been justified in defending themselves.[93] Two years later, in a spirited attack on Aborigines, an editorial in *The Cooktown Herald* went so far as to assert that

> it is well known ... that the first hostilities have in all cases been on the part of the blacks. When the blacks attacked and stormed ... [Macmillan's] camp ... he was in no way to blame for the loss of life that eventuated.[94]

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89 St George's report of 24 November 1873 to the Colonial Secretary, as published in *The Brisbane Courier,* 27 November 1873, p. 2.

90 As reported in *The Brisbane Courier,* 13 December 1873, p. 5.

91 See Jack, *Northmost Australia,* Vol. 2, pp. 421-2. From the report of the *Cleveland Bay Express* correspondent, in particular, it seems likely that the number of Aborigines killed was probably in the order of twenty to thirty, rather than the 'hundreds of blacks were killed' as asserted in A. Laurie, 'The Black War in Queensland', *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland,* 1, September 1959, p. 169.

92 Jack, *Northmost Australia,* pp. 421-2.

93 The evidence regarding black troopers as published in *The Brisbane Courier,* 13 December 1873, p. 5. Other evidence given included the admission that those blacks not killed in the initial attack were pursued and killed in a nearby lagoon: Jack, *Northmost Australia,* Vol. 2, pp. 421-2.

94 *CHPRA,* 8 December 1875, p. 2.

The Aboriginal Response

In the months after the initial transit by St George and Macmillan, hundreds more would-be miners followed in their footsteps, with further sporadic but small-scale clashes with Aborigines being reported to the authorities. A number of those clashes, however, occurred when would-be miners, who were trapped by floodwaters between rivers along the route to the Palmer, purposely left the track in search of game (or gold) and confronted Aborigines in a chance encounter.

Indeed, throughout most of 1874, with some 3000-4000 mainly white would-be miners transiting the track from Cooktown, there are very few reports of Aborigines deliberately targeting those en route to the Palmer.[95] Moreover, European settlers in Cooktown were never under any serious or particular threat, despite local newspaper editorials — couched in foreboding terms — warning of the possibility that the Aborigines 'might either slaughter us when we are quite unprepared or burn us out of their territory'.[96] It seems probable, therefore, that over the space of the first year of Cooktown's settlement, Aboriginal groups to the east of the Great Dividing Range gradually came to accept that their best option was to avoid the fledgling township itself and to allow those trespassers using the track between Cooktown and the Palmer to pass unimpeded.

That uneasy truce came to an abrupt end in late October 1874 with the killing by Aborigines, probably of the Koko-Wara group, of the Strau family near the Normanby River (within twenty kilometres of Battle Camp). A closer reading of the circumstances, however, indicates that the incident was not simply 'another wanton and brutal murder of defenceless whites', as contemporary accounts would suggest.[97]

Rather, it seems evident that local Aborigines were attempting to prevent the opening up of a new diversionary section of track which would

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95 The exception was native troopers escorting gold from the Palmer to Cooktown, who seemed to have been considered 'fair game' by Aborigines around Battle Camp, in particular: see *CHPRA,* 3 June 1874, p. 2, for example, reporting an incident when spears were thrown at native troopers as they camped at night near Battle Point.

96 See *CHPRA,* 1 July 1874, p. 2.

97 For a somewhat 'sensationalised' account of the incident, see *CHPRA,* 21 October 1874, p. 3.

have taken traffic 'along the banks of the Normanby ... [close to] a network of lagoons, dense scrub, and rich vegetation, infested with game'.[98] Indeed, the Aborigines went so far as to place logs across the track to stop drays, as well as 'stakes about three feet high in the wheel tracks to stay the progress of wheels'.[99] The unarmed Strau family was also advised by other teamsters not to attempt the new track but persisted, with the husband saying 'he was not afraid of blacks, as he had been used to them'.[100]

In the event, the killing of the family and the reported sexual violation of Strau's wife and young daughter provoked an outrage among whites.[101] A nearby group of white teamsters formed themselves into 'a strong, well-armed party' and proceeded after the offending Aborigines, although the result of their pursuit is not recorded.[102] Several days later, a native police detachment under the command of Sub-Inspector Douglas joined the pursuit, with one of the local Cooktown newspapers anticipating that 'a leaden dose of scriptural facts' was about to be administered.[103] Douglas' subsequent report noted only that his men 'followed the murderers across the Normanby River, where they overtook and dispersed them'.[104]

In the weeks and months that followed, as Europeans continued to avenge the Straus in a wave of indiscriminate shooting and killing, Aboriginal resistance similarly hardened. Aboriginal attacks on whites and Chinese became commonplace along the length of the track to the Palmer, with *The Cooktown Herald* noting in late 1875 that 'the black nuisance is becoming quite a bore to those that have occasion to travel the roads'.[105] Moreover, at the infamous Hell's Gate, a particularly vulnerable defile on the approaches to the main range, a group of Aborigines — possibly the

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98 *CHPRA,* 21 October 1874, p. 3.

99 *CHPRA,* 21 October 1874, p. 3.

100 See W.H. Corfield, 'Reminiscences of North Queensland, 1862-1878', *Journal of the Historical Society of Queensland,* 2, 2, June 1923, p. 91 for a first-hand account of the incident.

101 Allegations of the sexual abuse of white women by Aborigines are discussed in more detail later in this chapter under the heading 'The Alleged Violation of White Women'.

102 *CHPRA,* 21 October 1874, p. 2.

103 *CHPRA,* 21 October 1874, p. 2.

104 As reported in Corfield, 'Reminiscences', p. 91.

105 *CHPRA,* 20 October 1875, p. 2.

fighting-age remnants of the Koko-Wara group — regularly ambushed those passing by over a period of several months in late 1875.[106]

The frequency and severity of such clashes needs to be tempered by the estimate that the total number of Europeans and Chinese killed by Aborigines both on the goldfields and on the Cooktown-Palmer track throughout the 1870s probably did not exceed 100.[107] Given that an average of 4000 whites and Chinese passed along the Cooktown-Palmer track each year from 1874 to 1879, the likelihood of an individual being killed by Aborigines on the track was probably less than 0.4 per cent.[108] Had the same individual stayed in Cooktown, his or her chance of dying from illness, disease or accident, at least in 1874, was 3.3 per cent.[109]

Aboriginal Attacks on Stock

More vulnerable to Aboriginal retaliation were the horses, bullocks and cattle of white prospectors, miners, carriers and settlers. Between 1873 and 1879, at least 133 horses and 67 bullocks were killed by Aborigines in the Palmer River alone, with some estimates putting the combined total at over 300.[110] Along the Cooktown-Palmer track, scores of saddle- and pack-horses were similarly speared or driven off, with the local Cooktown newspapers publishing reports practically every week such as 'carriers advise horses lying dead ... in the vicinity of Oakey Creek, also three bullocks'.[111]

Some of the animals were killed in sporadic attacks by Aborigines on the pack trains and bullock-wagons of carriers supplying the Palmer

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106 See, for example, reports of attacks in *CHPRA,* 21 October 1875, p. 2 and in Trezise, *Last days,* p. 145.

107 The basis of this calculation is discussed in more detail later in this chapter under the section headed 'The Balance Sheet of Losses'.

108 Calculated on the basis that, in very crude terms, the population of the Palmer goldfields increased (or decreased) each year between 1874 and 1879 by an average of 4045 persons (taken from 'population of the goldfields' statistics in *QVP,* 1874-80) and that the average number of whites and Chinese killed per year on the track was 16.6 (100 divided by six years). If carriers, returnees and visitors are also taken into account, the percentage would be even smaller.

109 Based on a crude death toll in Cooktown of sixty six persons in 1874, from an estimated population of 2000: see *QVP,* 2, 1875, p. 1186.

110 See I.L. Hughes, 'A state of open warfare: frontier conflict in the Cooktown area' in Reynolds, *Race relations,* p. 107.

111 See *CHPRA,* 8 May 1875, p. 2.

track.[112] Others were killed in Aboriginal raids on mining camps, like the fifty horses reportedly speared in a single attack on the Palmer in September 1874.[113] Most were killed when they were left unattended and free to graze at night, often roaming (albeit hobbled) several kilometres from the camp of their owners. There are numerous instances throughout the various prospecting expeditions of James Venture Mulligan, for example, when his party literally spent days searching for horses which had wandered off during the night.[114]

That obviously raises the question as to whether local Aborigines deliberately targeted the horses and cattle of whites, as a means of disrupting the supply line between Cooktown and the Palmer, or whether unattended stock were largely seen by Aborigines as a convenient new source of food. There are numerous reports of animals being killed and eaten by the Aborigines. Three would-be diggers from New Zealand, for example, had two of their horses speared overnight as they camped astride the Palmer track, finding in the morning that 'half the carcass ... [of one had been] cut off and taken away'.[115] In another incident on the Palmer, 'the remains of [a horse] ... was found consisting of its head and feet, all the rest having been eaten'.[116]

Contemporary reports also contended that Aborigines at times drove off groups of up to twenty horses to 'inaccessible mountain strongholds', there to kill them as required.[117] That story seems somewhat far-fetched, as does the suggestion that 'horses and bullocks became [the Aborigines'] staple food', because their own traditional sources of food had been so devastated by the white invasion.[118] At least in the area west of Cooktown to the main range, there is little evidence to suggest that the transit of would-be miners to the Palmer had any significant impact on

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112 See, for example, an incident reported in *The Cooktown Courier,* 3 October 1874, p. 3.

113 See H. Reynolds, 'The unrecorded battlefields of Queensland' in Reynolds, *Race relations,* p. 27.

114 On Mulligan's fifth expedition, the party spent nine days (21 June to 2 July 1875) looking for lost horses: see Mulligan, 'Expedition ...', p. 10. The carrier William Corfield attempted to protect his stock by camping with his bullocks once they settled for the night after feeding: Corfield, 'Reminiscences', p. 93.

115 *The Cooktown Courier,* 5 December 1874, p. 2.

116 *CHPRA,* 6 December 1876, p. 2.

117 See Loos, *Invasion and resistance,* p. 73.

118 See Holthouse, *River of gold,* p. 98 and Loos, *Invasion and resistance,* p. 73.

native game or other Aboriginal food sources; rather, the impact, particularly as a result of the 'dispersal' tactics of the native police, was on the Aborigines themselves.[119]

The most likely explanation, therefore, would seem to be that Aborigines in the Cooktown area had no 'policy' of targeting stock *per se* although, in any premeditated attack on whites or Chinese, horses and cattle were probably seen as soft, alternative targets of opportunity. Moreover, as race relations worsened from late 1874 onwards, local Aborigines probably had fewer inhibitions about killing unattended stock, presumably on the basis that it was a reasonable exchange for the losses being inflicted by Europeans on their traditional sources of game.

The Myths of Aboriginal Cannibalism

In a similar vein to the reports of horses being driven off to 'mountain strongholds' were rumours of

> the devil's kitchen ... where captured Chinese were taken by the dozen and hung on trees by their pigtails until they were needed for killing and eating.[120]

Such rumours, like Holthouse's assertion that 'hundreds [of Chinese] were ambushed, captured and eaten at leisure', are unfounded.[121] The noted anthropologist, Walter Roth, in his research in North Queensland could find 'no instance where any ... male or female had been killed solely for the purpose of providing a repast'.[122]

That is not to say that Aborigines in the Cooktown-Palmer area did not engage in cannibalism. Pietistic burial cannibalism (endo-cannibalism) was widely practised in Far North Queensland and elsewhere

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119 The latter issue is discussed later in this chapter under the heading 'An Instrument of Extermination: The Native Mounted Police'.

120 Holthouse, *River of gold,* p. 94.

121 See Holthouse, *River of gold,* p. 94.

122 W.E. Roth, 'Ethnological Studies among the North-West-Central Aborigines [of Queensland]', *North Queensland Ethnography Bulletin,* No. 3, Brisbane, 1901-2.

in Australia, as were certain ritual acts of revenge cannibalism.[123] Instances of the eating of human flesh 'solely for food were much rarer'.[124] Moreover,

> the degree to which Queensland Aborigines actually indulged in this practice is problematical, as is the explanation for it.[125]

Nevertheless, contemporary accounts from the region abound with allegations of wanton Aboriginal cannibalism. George Dalrymple, as he headed north towards the Endeavour River, noted in his journal on 19 October 1873 that his men had seen

> unmistakable evidence of wholesale habitual cannibalism ... [with] heaps of human bones and skulls in each camp ... [and] lumps of half-eaten flesh in the gins' dilly bags.[126]

Dalrymple's men, however, had been engaged at the time in a clash near Cape Tribulation with an 'utterly reckless mob of blacks ... [led by] a big hulking ferocious looking savage over six feet tall'.[127] So it seems possible that their description of the evidence of cannibalism was perhaps *post facto* justification for their massacre of a large number of 'the mob'.

Reports of cannibalism along the Cooktown-Palmer track were much more speculative, notwithstanding the assertion by Holthouse that Aborigines in the area 'for centuries ... had been in the habit of tiding themselves over the bad season with human flesh'.[128] When a would-be miner by the name of Flannery went missing after a clash with Aborigines, *The Cooktown Herald* quickly asserted that 'there can be little doubt ...

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123 E.G. Heap, 'Some notes on cannibalism among Queensland Aborigines, 1824-1900', *Queensland Heritage,* 1, 7, November 1967, pp. 25-6. See also, for example, A.W. Howitt, 'Burial practices of the Native Tribes of South-east Australia' in M. Charlesworth *et al* (eds.), *Religion in Aboriginal Australia: an anthology,* University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1994, pp. 221, 229 and 233-4.

124 Heap, 'Some notes on cannibalism', pp. 25-6.

125 R. Evans, 'A king of brutes: stereotyping the vanquished' in Evans *et al, Exclusion,* p. 72.

126 Dalrymple, 'Narrative ...', pp. 632-3.

127 Dalrymple, 'Narrative...', p. 632.

128 Holthouse, *River of gold,* p. 52.

[that he has become] the staple of a horrid banquet to the savages'.[129] Similarly, when a lone Chinese miner reported that his five colleagues had been killed in an Aboriginal ambush, the local newspaper noted that

> the increasing appetite of the aborigines for roasted Asiatic is one of their marked peculiarities.[130]

Certainly, the Chinese were easier targets for Aborigines than Europeans, as they were generally poorly armed, nearly always travelled on foot and were less capable of reprisals.[131] But stories that so-called Aboriginal cannibals preferred Chinese to Europeans were mostly spread by whites attempting to inspire fear and panic amongst the Chinese in order to get them to quit the goldfields. Apart from the occasional report of an aged Aborigine supposedly recollecting that Chinese flesh tasted sweeter than the salty flesh of whites, there is not a shred of substantiated evidence that even a single Chinese was captured and subsequently eaten by local Aborigines in the Cooktown-Palmer area.

The Alleged Violation of White Women

Equally spurious were the rumours that Aborigines 'lusted after white women' and that women and female children would suffer the grossest sexual indignities in the event of their capture. Within a mind-set more usually associated with the Indian frontiers of the American West

> it was generally held that in the event of an Aboriginal raid ... a man should keep his last shot [for a female companion rather than let her] ... fall into the hands of these fiends.[132]

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129 *CHPRA,* 10 November 1875, p. 2. *The Cooktown Courier,* 21 February 1877, p. 2 similarly reported an account from Senior Constable Pickering that his party of native police had found a 'large oven [at Hell's Gate] ... where the cannibals had cooked ... men and horses ... all together for their horrid feast'.

130 *CHPRA,* 12 July 1875, p. 2.

131 The supposed passivity of the Chinese should not be over-stated. After one particular clash with Aborigines, 'the Chinamen cut off the ears of both victims and brought them in to the township in pickle': J.H. Binnie, *My life on a tropic goldfield,* Penguin, Melbourne, 1944, pp. 22-3.

132 Evans, 'A king of brutes', p. 71.

Yet throughout the entire 1870s, the alleged violation of the Strau woman was the *only* reported incident of the rape of a white woman by Aborigines in the Cooktown-Palmer area. Moreover, a closer reading of the various accounts of her death raises considerable doubt as to whether she was sexually abused by her attackers.

William Corfield, for example, who spoke to the two carriers who found the bodies of the family in the immediate aftermath of the killings, recounted that 'a spear had been driven through her mouth, and pinned her to the ground' (with no mention of her state of dress or any suggestion of sexual abuse).[133] *The Cooktown Herald,* though, reported in its version of the incident several days later that the woman was found 'stark naked ... evidently having been ravished by the murderous wretches, and then tomahawked in the head'.[134]

The Cooktown Herald report also alleged that the body of the daughter 'also on her back naked ... lay alongside her mother', inferring that she too had been sexually abused.[135] Corfield's account, however, claimed that the body of the girl was found some distance away 'with a large gash across the forehead [and] her stomach ripped up by the blacks' wood knives', but with no mention of her nakedness nor any suggestion of sexual abuse.[136]

Indeed, the only mention of sexual abuse in Corfield's account is the hearsay comment that 'the police learnt through the troopers ... that the woman was subjected to horrible outrage by the blacks' before being killed.[137] As for Dalrymple at Cape Tribulation, that 'confession' smacks of *post facto* justification for the killing by the police of the entire group of alleged perpetrators. Certainly, it would be stretching the credulity of any reasonable observer to believe that Inspector Douglas' detachment calmly took the opportunity to obtain such a confession as they routed 'the

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133 See Corfield, 'Reminiscences', p. 91.

134 *CHPRA,* 21 October 1874, p. 3.

135 *CHPRA,* 21 October 1874, p. 3.

136 Corfield, 'Reminiscences', p. 91. In fact, Corfield's account contended that the girl had been captured alive and killed later, after 'two old gins quarrelled over [her] possession'.

137 Corfield, 'Reminiscences', p. 92.

murderers across the Normanby River, where they overtook and dispersed them'.[138]

The death in 1881 of Mary Watson, who fled the *bêche-de-mer* station on Lizard Island in a makeshift water tank after an attack by Aborigines, provoked a similar white outrage. The fact that there was no suggestion of any intention by the Aborigines to abuse her sexually meant little to outraged Europeans; nor did the fact that the attack was doubtless in retaliation for the abuses and exploitation suffered by Aborigines 'pressed' into service over the years by her husband, the station's white overseer. The issue was seen by Europeans simply as a cowardly attack by an inferior race on the family unit of white society, providing them with continued 'justification' for their subjugation of Aborigines.[139]

Stereotyping Aborigines as Black Savages

What emerges from the preceding discussion is that it well suited Europeans in Far North Queensland in the 1870s to portray the local Aborigines in pejorative, dehumanizing terms. That was in distinct contrast with the prevailing views at the time of Cook's visit in 1770, when ideas of 'noble savagery' were fashionable in educated circles in England.[140] Indeed, Cook had on board a native from the Tahitian Islands, whom he was taking back to England on a 'cultural exchange'.[141] Cook was duly able to record that the features of the Aborigines at the Endeavour River 'were far from being disagreeable [and that] their Voices were soft and Tunable'.[142]

Over the following 100 years, changing intellectual fashions and the influence of colonial life in Australia eroded the 'notable savage'

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138 Inspector Douglas' account as recounted by Corfield, 'Reminiscences', p. 91.

139 See R. Evans, 'A policy tending to extermination' in Evans *et al, Exclusion,* p. 51. It is noteworthy that the Chinese servant who fled the island with Mary Watson, and who also died, rates not a mention in the memorial to her erected in the main street of Cooktown.

140 See H. Reynolds, 'Racial thought in early colonial Australia', in *Australian Journal of Politics and History,* 20, 1, 1974, p. 51. See also H. Reynolds, *Dispossesion: black Australians and white invaders,* Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1989, pp. 104-19 discussing 'The enlightenment at the Antipodes'.

141 See Reed, *Captain Cook,* p. 94.

142 See Reed, *Captain Cook,* p. 95.

viewpoint. Europeans quickly found justification for the subjugation of Aborigines in an ideology of racism, coming to relegate them in terms of Social Darwinism to the lowest link of the 'Great Chain of Being'.[143] Contemporary accounts from about the mid nineteenth century, therefore, typically described 'the nature of the barbarians',[144] while others asserted that 'of all the wild men of the earth, the Australian savage is one of the most degraded'.[145]

Within that stereotyping, the 'black savage' came increasingly to be described in terms which emphasised the 'repulsiveness' of the image.[146] Allen, for example, claimed that 'no race of savages can be imagined more hideously ugly'.[147] The Jardines described the Aborigines they encountered as 'puny, wretched-looking creatures ... cowardly and treacherous in the extreme'.[148] Leichhardt noted that 'one can easily see the bad intention in their unsteady, greedy, glistening eyes',[149] while James Morrill, who lived with an Aboriginal group in North Queensland for seventeen years, would surely have reinforced contemporary prejudices with his astounding 'eye-witness' account that

> when born they are nearly white, but when they are three days old, the gins squeeze their own milk on them and rub charcoal into their skins to make them black and shiny.[150]

An extension of the 'black savage' stereotype was the prevailing belief among Europeans that 'blacks own no law themselves but the law of might'.[151] Many Europeans on the pastoral and mining frontiers in Far North Queensland accordingly subscribed to the view that 'the only thing to

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143 See N.S. Kirkman, 'A Snider is a splendid civiliser' in Reynolds, *Race relations,* p. 133 and N.A. Loos, 'The pragmatic racism of the frontier', also in *Race relations,* p. 299.

144 See, for example, the warning from the Colonial Secretary of Western Australia to the explorer A.C. Gregory in 1848: Gregory, *Australian explorations,* p. 14.

145 C.H. Allen, *A visit to Queensland and her goldfields,* Chapman and Hall, London, 1870, p. 179.

146 See R. Evans, 'Half-savage and half-starved: the condition of the Aboriginal remnant' in Evans *et al, Exclusion*, p. 89.

147 Allen, *A visit to Queensland,* p. 181.

148 Byerley, *Narrative of the expedition,* pp. 11 and 82-3.

149 Leichhardt, *Journal of an expedition,* p. 507.

150 Quoted in E.B. Kennedy, *Four years in Queensland,* Stanford, London, 1870, p. 81.

151 See E. Palmer, *Early days in North Queensland,* Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1983, p. 213.

do on seeing an [A]borigine was to shoot and shoot straight'.[152] The moral justification for such behaviour was further reinforced by the common belief that Aborigines were a doomed race and 'what good could accrue from the remnants of a race that is ... impossible to civilize?'.[153] Leichhardt, in particular, believed that 'neither Christianity nor civilisation would make any advance among the natives' and frequently deprecated any suggestion of human equality between whites and Aborigines.[154]

By stereotyping the Aborigines of Far North Queensland (and elsewhere) as 'black savages', Europeans were able to dismiss Aboriginal resistance to the coming of the white man as a response emanating purely from their savagery and 'primeval barbarism'.[155] The corollary was that violence against Aborigines by whites, 'when recognised at all, was simply a justifiable reaction to such savagery'.[156] Moreover, many Europeans on the North Queensland frontier, in the early 1870s at least, obviously held to the view that 'if the [local] blacks will not recognise the paramount influence of the [white man's] law, the consequence would of necessity become [their] extermination'.[157]

An Instrument of Extermination: The Native Mounted Police

As on most other frontiers in Central and North Queensland during the 1860s and 1870s, the

> manner in which aggression was most officially and relentlessly applied, and violence *institutionalised* on the [Cooktown-Palmer] frontier ... was through the agency of the Native Mounted Police.[158]

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152 See W.R.O. Hill, *Forty-five years' experience in North Queensland,* Pole, Brisbane, 1907, p. 31.

153 See Palmer, *Early days,* p. 209.

154 See, for example, Cotton, *Ludwig Leichhardt,* p. 140.

155 See Allen, *A visit to Queensland*, p. 179 and R. Evans, 'The "darkling plain": impressions of early racial confrontation' in Evans *et al, Exclusion,* p. 28.

156 Evans, 'The "darkling plain" ', p. 28.

157 As discussed in an editorial, *CHPRA,* 8 December 1875, p. 2.

158 See R. Evans, 'A policy tending to extermination' in Evans *et al, Exclusion,* p. 55. See also Reynolds, *Dispossession,* pp. 46-52 on the Queensland Native Mounted Police.

Elements of that force arrived in Cooktown with the initial wave of settlers and miners on 25 October 1873, having accompanied Gold Commissioner St George on board the SS *Leichhardt* from Cardwell.[159]

Over the succeeding twelve years, the number of native troopers in the Cooktown-Palmer area increased from twenty five in 1874 to a peak of seventy one in 1876, thereafter declining to around thirty.[160] Most of the native police were stationed either at the Palmer River (or the Hodgkinson goldfield from 1876) or at the police post on the Cooktown-Palmer track, established in mid 1874 at Puckley Creek (near the Normanby River, some seventy kilometres from Cooktown).[161] It also appears that a small detachment was stationed in Cooktown itself from 1875, as evidenced by the editorial complaint in *The Cooktown Herald* of 'black police lounging around the town'.[162]

As elsewhere, the native police in Far North Queensland quickly established a reputation for their brutal suppression of Aborigines.[163] In responding to reports of attacks by Aborigines on white miners or carriers, the native police — under command of a white officer — would typically track down the offending party (or any other Aborigines unfortunate enough to be in the area). They would then 'disperse them by force of arms', a euphemism for the indiscriminate shooting of able-bodied Aboriginal males (and any women or children who happened to be in range), and the driving away of the remainder.[164]

The carrier William Corfield, who accompanied a native police patrol in December 1875, described in *Boys Own*-type detail the summary

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159 See the account provided by the correspondent to the *Cleveland Bay Express,* as published in *The Brisbane Courier,* 29 November 1873, p. 5. It is not clear, however, whether the police detachment was drawn from the force at Cardwell or Georgetown, or from both.

160 Figures drawn from annual reports of the Commissioner of Police in *QVP,* 1874-1886. Most if not all of the troopers would have been drawn from Aboriginal groups elsewhere in Queensland.

161 The move to Puckley Creek as reported in *CHPRA,* 15 July 1874, p. 5.

162 *CHPRA,* 5 June 1875, p. 2.

163 For a general account of the Native Mounted Police in Queensland see S. Barnett, 'A study of the Queensland Native Mounted Police Force in the 1870s', BA (Hons) thesis, University of Queensland, 1975.

164 Evans notes that in their reporting of raids upon Aboriginal groups, 'the words "dispersal" or "dispersed blacks by force of arms" were the only description required (or allowed)': Evans, 'A policy tending to extermination', p. 61.

justice meted out to a group of Aborigines cornered after a three-day pursuit.[165] It is evident from his account that no attempt was made to arrest the alleged perpetrators (suspected of stock-spearing and the killing of two white teamsters).[166] Corfield's own involvement and his arbitrary killing of several Aborigines was explained away by the sweeping justification that 'I thought of the murders of Strau, his wife and daughter ... and the murder ... of the two packers'.[167] Yet the Strau killings had occurred some fifteen months beforehand. There was also nothing to substantiate that the Aboriginal group being pursued was in any way involved in either the killing of the Straus or that of the two packers.

Although the Aboriginal group in Corfield's account only included 'a mob of old gins', the native troopers in a dispersal action would typically be allowed to ravish their choice of Aboriginal women. If the circumstances of the patrol permitted, it was also not unusual for 'the pick' of the Aboriginal women to be seized and taken back to the police base camp for the sexual use of native troopers (and often their white officers), or to be traded off to European carriers and teamsters for their sexual use.[168] Aboriginal children whose parents were killed in a 'dispersal' (or those children simply separated from their parents) were also frequently kidnapped by the native police and distributed as 'orphans' to European settlers or carriers, usually for employment as child labour.[169]

Even more damaging to traditional Aboriginal society than specific pursuit actions were the periodic 'scourings of the country' by the native police. These patrols were aimed simply at disrupting and dislocating the lifestyle of any Aboriginal groups encountered, through the tactics of indiscriminate dispersal. After one such 'thorough scour' by Sub-Inspector Douglas and his men in July 1874, *The Cooktown Herald* reported that 'we have that gentleman's word that no more horses or cattle will be speared in our neighbourhood for some time'.[170] Similarly, Senior Sergeant Devine

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165 See Corfield, 'Reminiscences', pp. 94-5.

166 R. McGregor, 'Law-enforcement or just force? police action in two frontier districts' in Reynolds, *Race relations,* p. 71 similarly notes that in the Kennedy district 'shooting was their sole mode of operation'.

167 Corfield, 'Reminiscences', p. 95.

168 See Evans, 'A king of brutes', p. 80 and 'Harlots and helots', p. 104.

169 See W.H. Corfield, *Reminiscences of Queensland 1862-1899,* Frater, Brisbane, 1921, p. 53 talking of the 'splendid little fellow' given to him by the native police.

170 *CHPRA,* 29 July 1874, p. 2.

reported in October 1875 that his patrol to the Eight Mile had succeeded in dispersing one group of Aborigines, while

> on the following day a camp of 200 or more ... [were] again persuaded to retire ... leaving behind a splendid collection of spears.[171]

Notwithstanding the many reports of such 'successful' encounters, there is some evidence to suggest that the native police in the Cooktown-Palmer area were not always so effective. In July 1874, for example, every one of Sub-Inspector Dumaresque's native troopers deserted him on the Palmer, a somewhat desperate move given that they could have expected no mercy from local Aborigines and would have faced summary execution if captured by the authorities.[172] The most likely explanation for their desertion is that they resented the enforced absence from their local area, together with the harsh discipline of service within the Native Mounted Police. Another possibility, not mutually exclusive of the first, is that local Aborigines were proving to be formidable opponents who could guarantee native troopers 'a fate worse than death' in the event of their capture.

That latter possibility may explain why native police detachments steadfastly avoided going anywhere near Hell's Gate throughout the middle months of 1875, despite (or because of) a spate of Aboriginal attacks on miners and carriers.[173] An editorial in *The Cooktown Herald* of early June 1875, in a stinging attack on the native police, complained that

> the black demons ... [are] continuing their mischievous depredations ... spearing horses and cattle by wholesale ... [yet] black police never go up the Hell's Gate road where these native pests ... congregate.[174]

An alternative explanation is that certain of the white officers commanding the native police detachments in the Cooktown-Palmer area were either lazy or incompetent, or both. That view was certainly held by

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171 *The Cooktown Courier,* 30 October 1875, p. 3.

172 The desertion reported in *CHPRA,* 29 July 1874, p. 2. McGregor claims that 'there was frequently a problem of desertion' in the Kennedy district, while noting that their social alienation from local Aboriginal groups enforced their allegiance to the detachment: McGregor, 'Law enforcement', p. 67.

173 See the editorial in *CHPRA,* 17 July 1875, p. 2 complaining that 'no police have been seen [there] the past six weeks'.

174 *CHPRA,* 5 June 1875, p. 2.

the editor of *The Cooktown Courier* in late 1875 who charged that 'if the force were properly officered ... many of the murders in the district could have been avoided'.[175] Barnett, however, contends that white officers were well aware that if they 'did not successfully reduce the [Aboriginal] aggravation, dismissal was imminent'.[176] It seems possible, therefore, that the failure — or at least the unwillingness — of the native police to 'bring to heel' the more belligerent Aboriginal groups in the Cooktown-Palmer area may have related to their fear of them, compounded by the relatively inaccessible terrain of the Great Dividing Range.

From Extermination to Suppression

The Queensland Government never had a declared policy which could be construed as supporting or even condoning the indiscriminate killing of Aborigines by the Native Mounted Police. Rather, the official line was that

> demonstrations of strength of a character that ... [Aborigines] will respect are necessary to submission, which is the essential prologue to gaining an influence over them for good.[177]

The Commissioner of Police assured Parliament in 1882 that 'the efforts of the native police had been untiring' in their attempts at conciliation with the Aborigines of North Queensland.[178]

Local officials and commentators, however, saw the issue in much blunter terms. *The Cooktown Herald* argued in a lengthy editorial in December 1875 that 'we can see no middle course .... [The choice is either] the abandonment of the country or the complete repression of these pests'.[179] Engaging in the same debate, the *Rockhampton Bulletin* suggested that

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175 *The Cooktown Courier,* 17 November 1875, p. 3.

176 Barnett, 'A study', p. 89.

177 Parry-Okeden, 'Report', p. 37. But see Chapter 7 'Government policy: assimilation or segregation' in Reynolds, *Dispossession,* pp. 182-214 and especially the section on Queensland at pp. 195-205.

178 *QVP,* 1, 1882, p. 419.

179 *CHPRA,* 8 December 1875, p. 2.

> in order to initiate the horrors of the extermination policy ... the most merciful and effective [response] ... would be to despatch a large, well-equipped force [to Far North Queensland] to subdue them at once.[180]

The reality was that 'a large, well-equipped force', which already existed in the guise of the Native Mounted Police, was having some difficulty — in Far North Queensland at least — in carrying through the Government's *de facto* extermination policy. In early 1877 an editorial in *The Cooktown Courier* denounced the existing policy as a failure noting that

> armed police have been waging continual war with the blacks [for three years] and private individuals have been doing a great deal of shooting among them. [But] ... the result is what?[181]

That editorial sparked a heated debate in Cooktown over whether the local Aborigines should be exterminated or suppressed. The argument advanced by *The Cooktown Courier* was that 'if [the Aborigines] ... don't touch the whites, the police ... [should] leave them alone'.[182] The paper warned, however, that any attempt at inducing the Aborigines to live in harmony with the white population — as was largely the case in the period between December 1873 and October 1874 — would be futile until the native police desisted from

> [their] present fitful system of haphazard little massacres, having no apparent connection to the outrages they are supposed to punish.[183]

The outcome of the debate is unclear. It does seem, though, that clashes between the native police and Aborigines declined progressively thereafter, although that could be attributable also to the progressive decease in the population of the Palmer and Hodgkinson goldfields after 1877 (and the consequence of less traffic on the Cooktown-Palmer track).

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180 Quoted in *CHPRA,* 8 December 1875, p. 2.

181 *The Cooktown Courier,* 28 February 1877, p. 2.

182 *The Cooktown Courier,* 21 February 1877, p. 2.

183 *The Cooktown Courier,* 21 February 1877, p. 2. The editorial gave only cursory mention to the prospect of Aborigines and Europeans 'living in harmony', and there is little to suggest that the idea was ever taken particularly seriously within the Cooktown community or elsewhere.

What is clear is that the debate in Cooktown in the late 1870s over the issue of race relations was driven largely by a recognition that the policy of extermination had failed to deal with the stubborn remnants of Aboriginal resistance in the area. That was in contrast to the success of the unwritten policy of extermination elsewhere in Queensland or, alternatively, to the moral and economic considerations typically behind decisions to 'let in' the Aborigines, either to pastoral stations or island reserves.[184] Certainly, the Cooktown experience would seem to add a further dimension to Loos' conclusion that the rainforest and sea frontiers were the two obvious situations where Europeans were forced to accommodate the local Aborigines.[185]

The Balance Sheet of Losses

Accepting that the direct killing of Aborigines by the native police and white 'vigilantes' had largely tailed off in the Cooktown-Palmer area by the late 1870s, it is useful to compare losses on both sides to that point. According to a detailed study by Loos, the number of Europeans and Chinese killed by Aborigines throughout the 1870s in the Cooktown-Palmer area probably did not exceed about eighty five, although unrecorded Chinese deaths could realistically have pushed that figure towards 120.[186]

Probably around fifteen of the European deaths included in the eighty-five occurred on the 'sea frontier', between the Annan River to the south and Cape Flattery to the north.[187] They included Aboriginal revenge attacks on white overseers in the *bêche-de-mer* industry, such as the later attack against Mary Watson's husband on Lizard Island in 1881. They also

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184 See, for example, the discussion on 'letting in' in C. Moore, 'Restraining their savage propensities: the South Kennedy and North Leichhardt districts in the 1860s and 1870s' in Reynolds, *Race relations,* pp. 98-105 and A. Allingham, 'Burdekin frontier' in Reynolds, *Race relations,* pp. 126-130.

185 Loos contends that settlers on the rainforest frontier, finding the battle too slow and costly, entered into a treaty with resisting Aborigines, while on the sea frontier Aborigines were coopted for their labour: Loos, *Invasion and resistance,* p. 160.

186 See Loos, *Invasion and resistance,* Appendix B 'Settlers and their employees reportedly killed as a result of Aboriginal resistance in North Queensland between 1861 and 1897', pp. 194-247.

187 Loos has calculated that probably thirty whites were killed on the sea frontier in Far North Queensland during the 1870s: Loos, *Invasion and resistance,* p. 138. It seems reasonable to assume that about 15-20 of those deaths occurred in the Cooktown area, between the Annan River and Cape Slattery.

included the occasional but random attack by Aborigines on passing boats which ventured too near to the coast. The cutter *Prospect,* for example, en route to Cooktown from Cardwell in February 1879, 'had a very narrow escape from being captured by the blacks ...' after the vessel put in to shore to take on a supply of firewood.[188]

There is also some evidence to suggest that a number of European and Chinese deaths attributed to Aborigines on the Cooktown-Palmer track were in fact the work of criminal gangs who earned their living by robbing miners and carriers.[189] *The Cooktown Herald,* for example, reporting the deaths of two Chinese packers in July 1875, noted that although their heads had been terribly mutilated with tomahawks, there was an 'entire absence of any [other] aboriginal signs ... confirming the suspicion of foul play on the part of Europeans or Chinamen'.[190] A not uncommon ploy was reportedly for European gold robbers to thrust spears into the bullet wounds of their Chinese victims, in order to shift the blame to Aborigines.[191]

It seems probable, therefore, that the number of miners, prospectors, carriers and settlers killed by Aborigines on the mainland in the Cooktown-Palmer area during the 1870s was somewhere between fifty and seventy five.[192] To put that into perspective, 742 whites and Chinese died in Cooktown alone from illness or accident between 1874 and 1879.[193] The reasonable conclusion is that more whites and Chinese died in Cooktown from sickness and accidents *in each year* from 1874 to 1879 (an average of 123) than died in total at the hands of Aborigines in the hinterland during the whole of the 1870s.

The number of Aborigines killed was similarly not as high as many contemporary (and later exaggerated) accounts would suggest. Many

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188 As reported in *The Cooktown Courier,* 8 February 1879, p. 2.

189 See K. Cronin, 'On a fast boat to Queensland: the Chinese influx onto Queensland's goldfields' in Evans *et al, Exclusion,* p. 258.

190 *CHPRA,* 21 July 1875, p. 2.

191 See Tresize, *Last days,* p. 32.

192 Calculated by deducting 15-20 deaths on the sea frontier (see footnote 187) and 20-25 deaths by criminal gangs (assuming that about 20 per cent of reported deaths were the work of criminals rather than Aborigines) from the range of 85-120 total deaths as assessed by Loos.

193 Statistics derived from annual reports of births, deaths and marriages in *QVP,* 1875-80.

Aborigines — possibly as many as 1200-1500 in the Cooktown-Palmer area — were later to die indirectly from exposure to European and Chinese diseases and illnesses, and from starvation or malnutrition, following the destruction of their traditional lifestyle. But the total number killed directly by Europeans and native police throughout Far North Queensland was almost certainly less than 400 over the period 1861-97.[194]

Moreover, as many as 100 of those most likely died during their enforced service in the *bêche-de-mer* and pearling industries, particularly in the mid 1880s.[195] A further fifty or so probably perished at the hands of the Jardine brothers, during their expedition along the west coast of Cape York in 1864-5.[196] So probably around 250 or less were from the seven Aboriginal groups living astride the route between Cooktown and the Palmer (taking into account that some Aborigines were also killed in clashes with white prospectors and miners with the opening of the Etheridge goldfields).

More difficult to estimate are the losses wrought within the seven Cooktown-Palmer groups. On balance, it seems probable that those hardest hit would have been the Koko-Wara, whose tribal area encompassed the Normanby River and the infamous Battle Camp and Hell's Gate. Assuming that the Koko-Wara's original population was around 500 (see Table 3.2 at page 131), the number of able-bodied males of fighting age in the group (that is, those aged 15-29 years) would probably have numbered around seventy five.[197]

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194 See Reynolds, 'The unrecorded battlefields', p. 24 conservatively estimating the total for the whole of North Queensland as between 420 and 440.

195 In 1885, for example, thirty-one Aborigines died in those industries: see Reynolds, 'The unrecorded battlefields', p. 24.

196 In one clash alone on 18 December 1874, the Jardine party 'poured volley after volley into [a group of Aborigines] ... about 30 being killed': Byerley, *Narrative*, p. 36.

197 Calculated on the basis of an age/sex distribution of 15 per cent males between the ages of 15-29 years: see L.R. Smith, *The Aboriginal population of Australia,* ANU Press, Canberra, 1980, Figure 8.4.1 on p. 219 (albeit for Victoria in 1871 - no details were available for Queensland until 1890, by which time the age/sex distribution would have been profoundly affected by racial conflict).

Table 3.2 - A Possible Population Distribution of the Cooktown-Palmer River Aboriginal Groups circa 1870

Name	Tribal Area (kms)	Population (Note 1)	Able-bodied Males (Note 2)
Koko-Imudji	1600	220	33
Koko-Bujundi	800	110	17
Koko-Bididji*	1300	90	14
Koko-Walandja*	1600	110	17
Koko-Wara*	7300	500	75
Koko-Jawa*	7800	550	82
Koko-Jelandi*	5700	400	60
Totals	**26100**	**1980**	**298**

Source: Tribal names and areas from N.B. Tindale, *Aboriginal tribes of Australia,* ANU Press, Canberra, 1974, pp. 176-7.

Notes: 1. Overall population numbers derived from calculations shown at footnote 20 in Chapter 2. Individual numbers for the inland groups (indicated by asterisk) calculated on the basis of one person per 14.4 square kilometres of area: see L.R. Smith, *The Aboriginal population of Australia,* ANU Press, Canberra, 1980, p. 69. Coastal groups calculated on the same basis but with a factor of 2 applied to take account of the added availability of marine resources.

2. Calculated on the basis of the age/sex distribution shown at footnote 197, to this chapter that is, 15 per cent of the group would be able-bodied males between the ages of 15-29 years.

Given the frequency and intensity of clashes involving the Koko-Wara, it would not have been surprising if close to 75 per cent of their able-bodied men were killed between 1873 and 1878. Similarly, the two groups to the north and south of the Palmer River, the Koko-Jawa and Koko-Jelandi, could have had around two-thirds of their fighting-age men killed. Of the remaining groups, the three others astride the route to the Palmer could have lost around 50 per cent of their men. The Koko-Bujundi, in relative isolation south of Mount Cook and the Annan River, probably escaped reasonably lightly with a casualty rate of around 30 per cent.

The consequence of such estimates is that the seven Aboriginal groups of the Cooktown-Palmer area could have lost around two-thirds of their able-bodied men between 1873 and 1878 (see Table 3.3 below). Another sixty or so Aborigines — younger or older men, the infirm, and women and children — were probably inadvertently (but indiscriminately) killed in native police 'dispersals' and the like, taking the total killed to around 250, as mentioned earlier.[198]

Table 3.3 - An Estimate of Able-bodied Aboriginal Males killed between 1873 and 1878

Name	Able-bodied Male Population (from Table 3.2)	Possible Percentage Killed	Possible Number Killed	Number Left
Koko-Imudji	33	50	17	16
Koko-Bujundi	17	30	5	12
Koko-Bididji	14	50	7	7
Koko-Walandja	17	50	9	8
Koko-Wara	75	75	57	18
Koko-Jawa	82	66	55	27
Koko-Jelandi	60	66	40	20
Totals	**298**	**-**	**190**	**108**

The Impact on Aboriginal Society

Superficially, it could be said that the two sides suffered not markedly different losses across the period 1873 to 1878 — 100 or so adult male whites and Chinese killed versus 250 Aboriginal men, women and children. The difference is that 100 European and Chinese deaths represented a 'societal' casualty rate of something less than one per cent of the 20,000 or more miners and settlers who flooded through the area, whereas 250 Aboriginal deaths not only represented a casualty rate of over 10 per cent but effectively 'gutted' two male generations of Aboriginal society.

198 A number of the 'survivors' would also have sustained debilitating injuries, which would have degraded their ability to function within traditional Aboriginal society.

The impact on traditional Aboriginal society of the loss of almost two-thirds of their able-bodied males over such a short period would have been profound. Commenting upon a similar (but temporary) situation in the Batavia River region, caused by the absence of many of the young and middle-aged Aboriginal men in the fisheries industries, the anthropologist Walter Roth noted that

> these were the males who would have been most important in the hunting and fishing expeditions and the support, through kinship obligations, of a large number of dependants, especially older women.[199]

The practice of the native police to confiscate or destroy Aboriginal weapons found during 'dispersals' would have made life even more difficult for the survivors. After a raid at the Eight Mile near Cooktown in October 1875 the local newspaper reported that the routed Aborigines had left behind 'a splendid collection of spears ... which have been brought in as spoil'.[200] The need to replace quickly such confiscated weapons may explain, in part, why Aborigines on the Palmer track frequently 'carried away as a prize ... hoop iron for knives [and] waggon lynchpins for axes'.[201]

Particularly in the area around Cooktown and on the Palmer, the physical spread of white 'civilisation' would also have had a marked impact on the traditional lifestyle of the local Aboriginal groups. As settlers and miners 'turned a usurped land to new uses', they also monopolised or befouled water sources, unsettled native game in the vicinity of roads and tracks, and progressively pushed the remaining Aborigines — no doubt seriously demoralised and in psychological shock — into increasingly smaller tribal areas.[202] By the late 1870s, many of the Aboriginal clans

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199 See W.E. Roth to Under-Secretary Home Department of 4 October 1899, as published in 'Report of the Northern Protector of Aborigines for 1899', *QVP,* 5, 1900, p. 584.

200 *The Cooktown Courier,* 30 October 1875, p. 3.

201 Though Loos, *Invasion and resistance,* p. 81 cited the practice as an example of Aborigines readily adapting European articles to their traditional needs.

202 H. Reynolds, 'The land, the explorers and the Aborigines' in *Historical Studies,* 19, 75, 1980, p. 214.

in the region probably had no choice, because of imminent starvation, but to move to the fringes of European and Chinese communities.[203]

In Cooktown, as elsewhere in Queensland, officials were keen to ensure that 'the blacks' camp ... [would be] out of earshot, out of sight and, out of mind', with the proclamation in 1881 of an Aboriginal reserve on the northern banks of the Endeavour River.[204] There, in an area of 20,000 hectares, Aborigines 'would be unmolested as long as they did not commit any depredations'.[205] It seems unlikely, though, that any Aborigines would have attempted to revert to a traditional lifestyle within the reserve, not least because the area, 'consisting mainly of sandhills and swamps', was generally too poor to sustain a permanent existence.[206] Most camped on the immediate northern bank of the river, notwithstanding that they shared the location with a lepers colony for Chinese.[207]

As in other areas of Queensland, the move to the fringes of white and Chinese communities may have saved the remnants of Aboriginal groups in the Cooktown-Palmer area from imminent starvation.[208] Once there, however, their numbers were decimated by exposure to such European and Chinese diseases as smallpox, TB and pneumonia.[209] Others fell prey to the ills of alcoholism or opium addiction, while the sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women by men in the townships led to the widespread incidence of venereal diseases.

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203 Reynolds notes that the move to the fringes of towns because of hunger was not unusual throughout Queensland: see H. Reynolds, 'Townspeople and fringe-dwellers' in Reynolds, *Race relations,* p. 149. Some Aboriginal sub-groups no doubt shunned the move, and attempted to maintain their traditional lifestyle and their resistance to white expansion. Those who mounted the attack on Lizard Island in 1881, for example, were presumably Aborigines who had remained 'in the bush'.

204 Reynolds, 'Townspeople', p. 148.

205 See R. Evans, 'Missionary effort towards the Cape York Aborigines 1886-1910: a study of culture contact', BA (Hons) thesis, University of Queensland, 1969, p. 81.

206 Evans, 'Missionary effort', p. 81.

207 Evans, 'Half-savage and half-starved', p. 98.

208 Reynolds notes, however, that 'camp-dwellers were rarely able to gain a reliable and adequate supply of food': Reynolds, 'Townspeople', p. 151.

209 By 1886, Aboriginal numbers in the vicinity of Cooktown were estimated to be between 400 and 500: see Haviland, 'How much food will there be in heaven? ...'. pp. 126-7. Some Aborigines reportedly contracted leprosy from the Chinese living near their camp: Evans, 'Half-savage and half-starved', p. 98.

In Cooktown itself, Aborigines were progressively 'let in' to the town during the early years of the 1880s, usually as a cheap source of menial labour and to satisfy the sexual needs of a still male-dominated settlement. By 1885, though, 'the flotsam and jetsam of Aboriginal society' had created such a nuisance that a curfew was imposed after dark.[210]

In September 1886, with the opening of the Cape Bedford (or Hope Vale) mission, some fifty kilometres north of Cooktown, the Aboriginal 'nuisance' was moved even further out of sight and out of mind.[211] By 1897, the number of 'registered' Aborigines in the Cooktown area was under 100. It seems probable, therefore, based on the estimates at Table 3.2 (see page 131), that the population of the five Aboriginal groups to the east of the Great Dividing Range had been reduced over the space of about twenty-five years from around 1030 to the low hundreds. The fate of the two Palmer River groups was probably similar.

In Memoriam

One of the key themes in this chapter has been that an escalating cycle of racial conflict was underway in Far North Queensland long before the first white settlers arrived at Cooktown in October 1873. Another is that racial conflict in the Cooktown-Palmer area was as violent, and with an Aboriginal response as purposeful, as perhaps anywhere else in Australia.

In relation to the second theme, a possible explanation is that in most other parts of Australia, especially coastal areas, the gap between the first European explorers and the arrival of white settlers was usually in the order of years rather than decades.[212] The 'discovery' of Australia by Cook and the arrival of the First Fleet, for example, were separated by eighteen years. Settlers crossed the Blue Mountains hard on the heels of Blaxland and his party. Further north, settlers moved into the Darling Downs in the

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210 See Rowley, *The destruction of Aboriginal society,* p. 178.

211 For a brief account of the Lutheran missionary work at Cape Bedford see Evans, 'Missionary effort', p. 81. See also the good account in Haviland, 'How much food will there be in heaven? ...', pp. 119-149.

212 The obvious exception is much of inland Australia, but there, the Aboriginal population was relatively sparse and much less affected either by white exploration or settlement.

early 1840s, less than fifteen years after its 'discovery' by Cunningham in 1827. So for most Aborigines, the gap between first contact and 'invasion' was across only one or two generations.

Yet in Far North Queensland, and particularly around Cooktown, the gap spanned seven or eight generations, over about 100 years. Moreover, until 1873, the Aborigines had only intermittent contact with whites, resulting on almost every occasion (from an Aboriginal perspective anyway) in Europeans 'withdrawing' after some altercation or confrontation. The Aborigines, therefore, may well have come to believe — possibly to the extent of it becoming engrained in tribal lore — that they, unlike Aboriginal groups elsewhere, were able to keep whites from their traditional lands.

The irony, as pointed out by Reynolds, is that 'Aboriginal resistance did not heighten the respect of the white man, it deepened his hatred and contempt'.[213] And in a sad indictment of 'the coming of the white man', the Queensland Commissioner of Police reported to Parliament in 1897, following his inspection of the remnants of the Aboriginal groups of Far North Queensland, that

> I have avoided the use of the term tribes, as there are no such things as tribal chiefs, tribal laws or organisation left among them.[214]

Certainly, the conclusion of this chapter is that while 'the coming of the white man' resulted directly in the killing of around 250 Aboriginal men, women and children, the far greater losses occurred over the following three decades. Indeed, the rise of Cooktown — as will be discussed in the next chapter — effectively sealed the fate of traditional Aboriginal society in the Cooktown-Palmer area, as the remaining local Aborigines succumbed to exposure from European and Chinese diseases, or the ills of 'civilisation'.

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213 Reynolds, 'The unrecorded battlefields, p. 62.

214 Parry-Okeden, 'Report', p. 16.

CHAPTER 4 - TENT CITY TO TOWN

Cooktown in its heyday, in the mid-to-late 1870s, was a bustling commercial centre, boasting a population of some 3,000 people and around 650 buildings. Not surprisingly, many accounts of the physical growth of the town over its first five or so years have dwelt heavily on the more notorious aspects of Cooktown's history with frequent descriptions of its

> ... ninety-four licensed hotels, with as many brothels, with gambling dens, opium halls, dance halls, and good-time girls ready to ... strip off an apparently endless array of clothing at the rate of one nugget per garment.'[1]

At the other extreme are accounts from the time, dutifully recorded in *The Cooktown Courier* and *The Cooktown Herald and Palmer River Advertiser,* of the often lavish lifestyle of Cooktown's exclusive set of government officials, bank officers and prosperous businessmen and their families, looking down on the rest of Cooktown from their comfortable homes on the slopes of Grassy Hill. Theirs was an existence seemingly centred on piano recitals, race meetings and regattas, formal dinners, picnics and spring balls. Early issues of *The Cooktown Herald and Palmer River Advertiser,* for example, announced in May and June 1874 (only six months after the settlement began) that a fancy dress ball would be held at the Australian Hotel to celebrate the Queen's Birthday and that inaugural meetings of the Cooktown jockey and cricket clubs were planned.[2] Yet only a month beforehand, the newly-appointed government medical officer was still seeing patients *at his tent* in Charlotte Street.[3]

Obviously, the mainstream story of Cooktown's early commercial and residential development lies somewhere between the two extremes. It is also evident that the physical growth of Cooktown is more than just the story of a 'rip-roaring' frontier town making the transition to a respectable commercial centre for its hinterland. What emerges in this chapter is the complex interplay between the views of the government-of-the-day and Cooktown's early settlers. Initially, for example, the Government saw the town primarily

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1 See H. Holthouse, *River of gold: the story of the Palmer River gold rush,* Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1967, p. 141.

2 *The Cooktown Herald and Palmer River Advertiser (CHPRA),* 13 May 1874, p. 3, 20 May 1874, p. 2 and 3 June 1874, p. 2.

3 As advertised in *CHPRA,* 22 April 1874, p. 1.

as the entry point at which to extract duty and taxes on goods en route to the Palmer. Government expenditure, therefore, tended to relate primarily to revenue collection, such as customs, and harbour and wharfage facilities. Similarly, the majority of early settlers were service providers — publicans, storekeepers, carriers, farriers and the like — who were out 'to make a quick buck' and cared little for the town itself.

With the passage of time, however, the more civic-minded settlers (many of whom had achieved a degree of social status through their official position or their commercial prosperity) began to agitate for the accoutrements of 'civilised society', such as kerbs and paved roads, a town hall, botanical gardens etc, largely on the perceived basis that such trappings would demonstrate both to the Government and would-be residents the progress and longer-term viability of the town. But many of Cooktown's service providers remained apathetic towards such 'progress'. Moreover, once the bubble of the Palmer had burst by about late 1877, the Government (though not the local government authorities) rapidly downscaled its commitments to public works in the town. Indeed, from about 1878 onwards, the development (or demise) of Cooktown is largely a story of business and civic leaders attempting to convince the Government in Brisbane of the town's longer-term prospects, culminating in the ill-advised and ill-fated railway line to Laura.[4]

Overlaying the gradually divergent views of the Government and civic leaders was the often under-rated issue of the Chinese presence in Cooktown. Much has been written about the presence of Chinese on the Palmer River goldfields and their arrival and subsequent exodus through Cooktown. What is less well known is that, in 1875 and 1876, more Chinese were reportedly living in Cooktown itself than whites.[5] Yet apart from occasional mentions of 'Chinatown, a town within a town ... a series of narrow, covered alleys like a great bazaar', very little has been written of the role and influence of the Chinese business community in Cooktown.[6] This chapter

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4 These issues are addressed in detail in Chapter 7 'Boom to Bust'.

5 See editorials in *The Cooktown Courier,* 20 October 1875, p. 2 noting 'about 2000 of them within the precincts of the town' and similarly on 21 October 1876, p. 2, the claim that 'they make up more than half our town population'.

6 Holthouse's description of Cooktown's Chinatown in *River of gold,* pp. 144-5 is one of the few mentions of the subject in either primary or secondary sources.

includes, therefore, the largely unrecorded part played by Cooktown's Chinese community in its transformation from tent city to town.[7]

The Initial Lodgement

Cooktown's first permanent building (differentiating here between tents and those constructed from timber and iron) was probably the government store erected by A.C. Macmillan's work party in the first few days of November 1873.[8] Neither its size, description nor location are recorded. But it was probably constructed from sawn timber and corrugated-type iron from materials loaded on the *SS Leichhardt* at either Bowen or Townsville. It was probably erected on the government reserve at the foot of Grassy Hill (see Map 4.1 over), at the head of the main street as marked out by Macmillan prior to his departure for the Palmer River on 31 October 1873.

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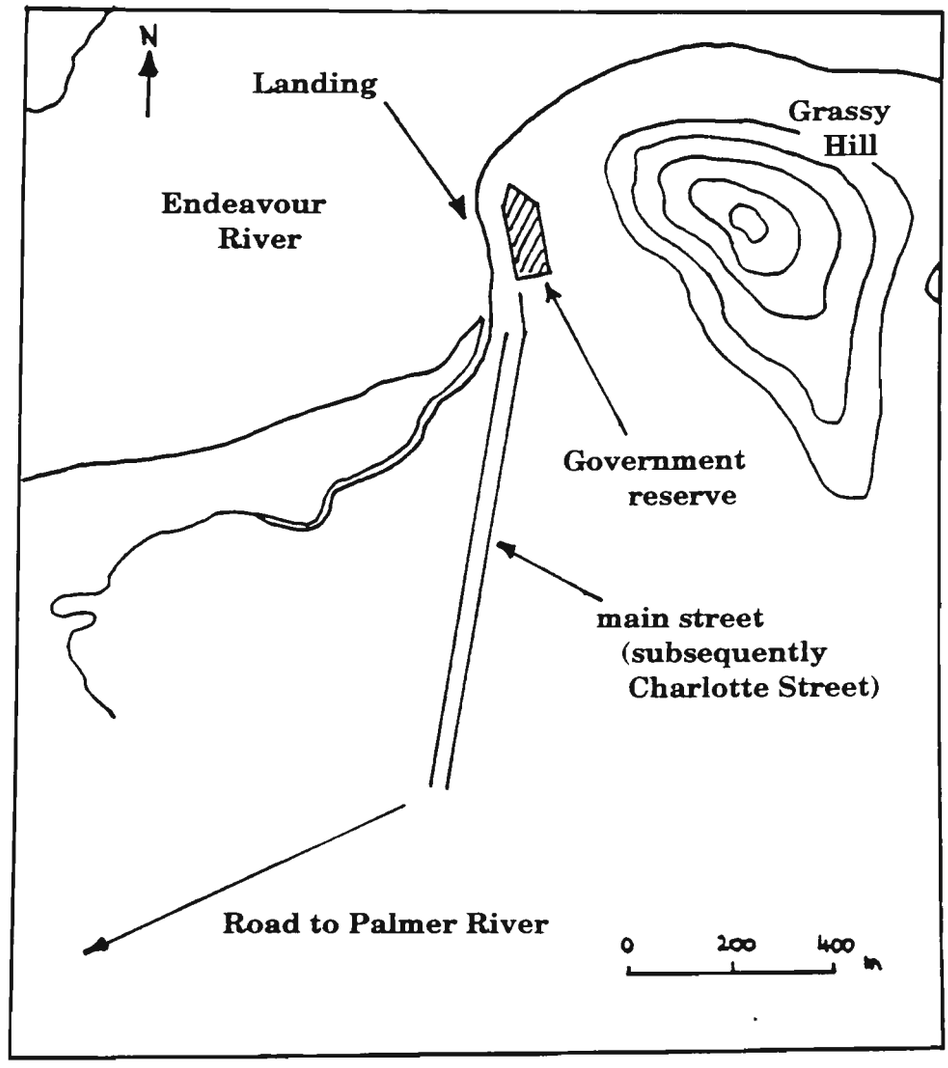
7 The role and influence of the Chinese community in Cooktown, in a social and economic context, are also addressed further in Chapters 5 and 7.

8 See A.C. Macmillan to Secretary for Works, 30 October 1873, in-letter 4598/73 of 1873, WOR/A74, Queensland State Archives (QSA).

Map 4.1 - The Settlement at Cooktown as Laid Out by A.C. Macmillan in October 1873



Source: As reported in official mining news published in *The Brisbane Courier*, 21 January 1874, p. 3.

The function of this building, apart from it being a 'government store', is also not recorded. Presumably its purpose was to house the equipment and supplies of Macmillan's road party which, in the event, he left at the settlement while he proceeded on his 'flying visit' to the Palmer. It is possible that it was also used temporarily as a store by the small police detachment which was left 'to form a station on the river', while the main police party accompanied Howard St George to the Palmer.[9]

Apart from the government store, all the other 'buildings' in the fledgling settlement were tents or timber and canvas fabrications. The number erected in late October and the early days of November 1873 is

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9 As reported by the correspondent to the *Cleveland Bay Express*, as published in *The Brisbane Courier*, 29 November 1873, p. 5.

difficult to quantify. Dalrymple described the scene on 25 October, the day of the *SS Leichhardt's* arrival, as like 'a young diggings township ... [with] tents rising in all directions'.[10] But probably as many as two-thirds of those tents belonged to the police detachment and road party accompanying St George and Macmillan, and to the eighty-six would-be diggers who left the settlement on 31 October bound for the Palmer.[11]

Indeed, given that reports suggest that the *SS Leichhardt* had taken on some ninety diggers at Bowen and Townsville, and 'more passengers' at Cardwell, the number left at Cook's Town was probably less than fifty, of whom more than half would either have been members of Macmillan's road party (who were subsequently withdrawn in early December) or the police detachment.[12] Certainly, the only report of commercial activity at the settlement prior to the departure of the main party for the Palmer was that 'two stores and a public-house [or tent] were doing a brisk business'.[13]

Moreover, most of the 'tons upon tons of merchandise' taken on by the *SS Leichhardt* at either Bowen or Townsville was obviously intended for the immediate resupply of the 500 or so men already at the Palmer diggings, presumably through two or three retail distributors who had accompanied the expedition to Cook's Town. Indeed, immediately upon his arrival at the goldfields, Howard St George arranged for all the available packhorses, some 200 in number, to be sent to the Endeavour River to collect rations for the diggers who by then were completely out of supplies.[14]

The point of this discussion is that, contrary to contemporary accounts, it seems unlikely that a 'bustling tent city' sprang up almost

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10 G.E. Dalrymple, 'Narrative and Reports of the Queensland North-East Coast Expedition 1873' in *Votes and proceedings of the Legislative Assembly of Queensland [QVP]*, 2, 1874, p. 635.

11 See letter Howard St George to Secretary for Works and Mines of 16 November 1873: in-letter 158 of 1874, WOR/A77, QSA. See also the report by the correspondent to the *Cleveland Bay Express* advising that St George and Macmillan left with 106 men (and that five foolhardy souls had ventured alone earlier): see *The Brisbane Courier,* 13 December 1874, p. 5.

12 There is considerable variance in the reports of the number of would-be miners on board *SS Leichhardt*: Dalrymple reported seventy (see 'Narrative ...', p. 634), a member of his expedition said 150 (see *The Brisbane Courier,* 13 November 1873, p. 3) and the *Cleveland Bay Express* correspondent said 180 (see *The Brisbane Courier,* 29 November 1873, p. 5). A figure of around ninety diggers, with a total expedition complement of around 150 seems most likely.

13 See *The Brisbane Courier,* 29 November 1873, p. 5.

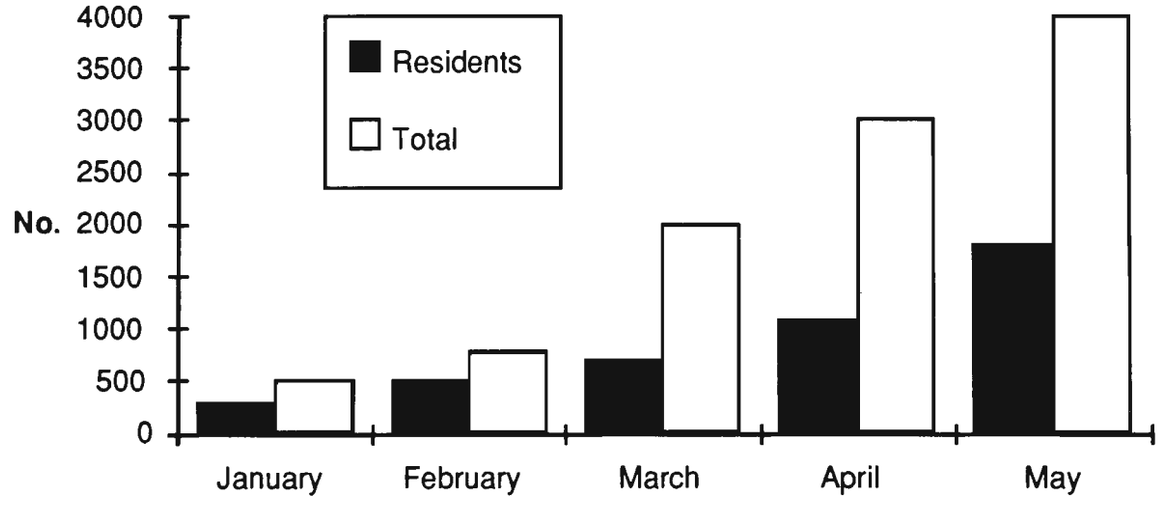
14 See letter St George to Colonial Secretary dated 24 November 1873, as published in *The Brisbane Courier,* 27 November 1873, p. 2.

overnight in Cook's Town with the arrival of the *SS Leichhardt* on 25 October 1873. Rather, it seems that the initial lodgement — once the main party departed — comprised a handful of police, probably about ten storekeepers and their assistants (several of whom were presumably planning to return from whence they came as soon as the Palmer was resupplied) and the temporarily unemployed Works Department road party.

The Early Rush

It is similarly useful to attempt to differentiate, from the numerous accounts of the rush to the Endeavour River which then took place between December 1873 and mid April 1874, between those who stayed in Cooktown and those who were heading for the Palmer. Figure 4.1 (below) shows that the semi-permanent population of Cooktown steadily increased over that period from about 300 in early January 1874 to around 1800 by late April. Numerous heady accounts from a variety of ill-informed visitors, however, often put the population as high as 4000, which represented more probably the combined number of residents and transients.

Figure 4.1 - The Estimated Number of Residents and Transients in Cooktown: January-May 1874
(as at the first of each month)



Source: Resident numbers primarily from telegrams Police Magistrate Thomas Hamilton to Colonial Secretary dated 23 March (in-letter 399/74 of 1874, COL/A192, Queensland State Archives (QSA) and 2 May 1874, in-letter 1034/74 of 1874 COL/A195, QSA). For examples of exaggerated accounts, see *The Brisbane Courier,* 13 February 1874, p. 2 and *The Cooktown Herald and Palmer River Advertiser (CHPRA),* 29 April 1874, p. 2.

Differentiating between residents and transients is obviously important in further distinguishing between dwellings in Cooktown of a semi-permanent nature and the temporary encampments of those readying to depart for the Palmer. The inability to make that distinction is evident in many of the early accounts of the physical growth of Cooktown, not least in the reports of dwellings being constructed along Charlotte Street. In what was probably a reasonable assessment, the visiting Commissioner of Police noted in late February that the main street had been built upon on its eastern side for half a mile.[15] But at least two accounts from the same time claimed that the main street had buildings on each side stretching for two miles, while other more conservative commentators put the figure at one and a quarter.[16]

In a similar vein, it is also evident that many early commentators, caught up in the euphoria of the rush mentality, exaggerated the nature, size and construction materials used in even the semi-permanent buildings which had sprung up in the opening months of Cooktown's existence. In mid January 1874, for example, one sober report of Cooktown's progress noted that the eastern side of Charlotte Street 'is tolerably lined with shanties and tents', while another in mid February noted that 'two or three of them are substantially built weatherboard places'.[17] Inexplicably (and unbelievably), a correspondent from Cooktown was reporting only three weeks later that 'a large town exists ... with banks, public-houses, billiard saloons, theatres and rifle galleries ... and [that] buildings in the main street consist now almost entirely of wood and iron'.[18]

The more likely reality was that most, if not all, of the 'buildings' on the west side of Charlotte Street, the side reserved for government purposes, were only tents or canvas and timber fabrications. And in the period of uncertainty before the first public land action on 19 May 1874, the majority of the buildings on the east side of Charlotte Street and elsewhere were probably easily dis-assembled timber and canvas fabrications, albeit that many of the commercial buildings most likely had a timber and iron facade.

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15 See letter Commissioner Seymour to Colonial Secretary dated 24 February 1874, in-letter 399/74 of 1874, COL/A192, QSA.

16 See, for example, *The Brisbane Courier,* 19 January 1874, p. 2 and 16 February 1874, p. 3 and James Mulligan quoted in Holthouse, *River of gold,* p. 53.

17 See *The Brisbane Courier,* 10 January 1874, p. 5 and 20 February 1874, p. 3.

18 See *The Brisbane Courier,* 18 March 1874, p. 3 publishing a letter dated 12 March 1874.

Certainly, shipping records indicate that practically every ship arriving at Cooktown from late March 1874 onwards was carrying building materials (see Table 4.1 below), although what proportions were destined for the Palmer, rather than Cooktown, is unclear.[19]

Table 4.1 - Building Materials Arriving by Ship in Cooktown in late March 1874
(extracts from the manifests of every ship arriving in the week to 1 April 1874)

Vessel	Galvanised Iron (cases)	Nails (kegs)	Palings (nos.)	Timber (linear feet)	Timber (pieces)
Morning Light	5	-	4080	-	-
Marquis of Lorne	-	-	2000	-	905
African Maid	3	1	-	-	-
Princess Louise	4	9	5800	-	1613
Emma Jane	-	-	-	54215	-
Tengril	-	-	1000	-	-

Source: *CHPRA,* 1 April 1874, p. 2.

It also appears that the same commentators frequently exaggerated the number and size of the various businesses operating in Cooktown, particularly in relation to public houses and brothels. One correspondent claimed that there were sixty-five public-houses in Cooktown in late April 1874, while Holthouse quotes another as saying that 'the brothels outnumbered the public houses'.[20] Both accounts seem grossly exaggerated. The number of retail spirit licences issued in the period to 30 June 1874 was only thirty-seven.[21] Moreover, a number of those operated from general stores, rather than hotels or public-houses.[22] There is also not a single mention of brothels, prostitution or even dance-halls in either *The Cooktown Courier* or *The Cooktown Herald and Palmer River Advertiser* from April 1874

19 Given the uncertainty regarding the Palmer goldfields at about that time, as discussed in Chapter 2 under 'The Return Rush of April 1874', it seems possible that most of such material was in fact destined for Cooktown.

20 See *The Brisbane Courier,* 27 April 1874, p. 3 and Holthouse, *River of gold,* p. 54.

21 Licence details from *Queensland Government Gazette [QGG],* Vol. 15, 1874, p. 580 and pp. 918-9.

22 By mid 1874, it seems probable that there were about 40 hotels *per se* operating in Cooktown. The hotel industry is, however, discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

to the close of 1880.[23] That is not to say they did not exist. But their presence could not have been as overt as Holthouse would suggest, given the newspapers' sense of propriety on every other issue of public morality.

Somewhat surprisingly, the one aspect which rates barely a mention in most contemporary accounts of early Cooktown was the abysmal lack of government buildings and services (although perhaps understandable given the local community's primary focus on commerce). In February 1874, the town still had no police magistrate, no registrar of births, deaths and marriages, no postmaster and no hospital. Indeed, the government buildings consisted of two small iron and wooden buildings for the nine-man police detachment and one small hut (8 feet x 8 feet) for the acting sub-collector of customs.[24] One of the police buildings (8 feet x 6 feet) doubled as the court house and store for the Works Department, although in mid January 1874 the police court was 'completely destitute of office books and printed forms'.[25]

The foregoing somewhat negative assessment of Cooktown's early progress is not meant to disparage the obviously rapid development which occurred between November 1873 and April 1874. Rather, it is meant to rebut some of the more fanciful and exaggerated accounts which emerged both at the time and in later recountings of Cooktown's early days. It is also meant to portray Cooktown after six months of settlement not only as a boisterous frontier town, with a highly transient and male-dominated population, but also as a town somewhat uncertain of its own longer-term prospects.

The Land Sale of May 1874

In that regard, the single issue causing most uncertainty in terms of the physical growth of the town in the period to May 1874 was the lack of a government survey and associated plans for the sale of crown land. Bemoaning the lack of activity, an editorial in *The Cooktown Herald and Palmer River Advertiser* of 1 April 1874 lambasted the Government in Brisbane for its 'great wrong to the community' and pointed out that the delay

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23 There is frequent denunciation of the sin and immorality within Chinatown, but that usually related to gambling, opium smoking and the allusion to the homosexual activities of certain 'depraved heathens'.

24 See report by Police Commissioner Seymour to Colonial Secretary, as published in *The Brisbane Courier,* 27 February 1874, p. 3.

25 Seymour in *The Brisbane Courier,* 27 February 1874, p. 3 and report in *The Brisbane Courier,* 10 January 1874, p. 5.

'unsettles business mens [sic] calculations and keeps the public mind uneasy'.[26]

As illustrated at Map 4.1 (at page 140), A.C. Macmillan had laid out the main street and several government reserves as early as late October 1873. But his survey did not include the demarcation of building allotments, nor any additional parallel or cross streets. In consequence, Cooktown by early 1874 had degenerated into a hotch-potch collection of temporary buildings, shanties and tents strung out very roughly along Charlotte Street, but also occupying most of the supposed government reserves and many of the areas which clearly would be needed as thoroughfares.

The complete western side of Charlotte Street, which was reserved for government purposes, was a jumble of tents 'pitched as thick as it is possible to place them'.[27] Elsewhere, buildings had been erected on the post office reserve at the foot of Grassy Hill.[28] Charles Bouel, later a well known publican in the town, complained to the Surveyor General in January 1874 that 'two storekeeper justices of the peace, who are jealous of my [store's] position, being adjacent to the wharf' were threatening to evict him from a public reserve.[29] And dwellings along Charlotte Street had been erected 'without any regard to symmetry, except that they faced the road'.[30]

The arrival in Cooktown in February 1874 of James Read, the government surveyor commissioned to 'survey a number of suitable town allotments and mark off wharf frontages' was, therefore, initially welcomed by the townspeople.[31] The enthusiasm of a number turned to dismay, however, when it became obvious that Read was recommending street frontages of 9 metres (30 feet), as against the 18 metre (60 feet) frontages many had claimed, and that his plan for cross streets and thoroughfares meant that a number of dwellings would have to be removed.[32] One angry correspondent

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26 *CHPRA,* 1 April 1874, p. 2.

27 See report of Police Commisioner Seymour to Colonial Secretary published in *The Brisbane Courier,* 27 February 1874, p. 3.

28 See *CHPRA,* 22 April 1874, p. 3.

29 See C. Bouel to Secretary for Lands and Mines, 10 January 1874, in-letter 805/75 of 1874, LAN/A45, QSA.

30 See report in *The Brisbane Courier,* 20 February 1874, p. 3.

31 See the report in official mining news published in *The Brisbane Courier,* 21 January 1874, p. 3.

32 See, for example, letter to the editor in *CHPRA,* 20 May 1874, p. 3.

asserted that 'Mr Macmillan's authority to lay off the township seems to have been entirely ignored by the gentleman who came after him'.[33]

The other aspect causing even more consternation to many of those who had claimed a piece of land by simple possession, and had then erected a building upon it, was the advice from Brisbane that neither possession nor improvements would confer any pre-emptive right to purchase at the eventual land sale. The concern, raised in the editorial of *The Cooktown Herald and Palmer River Advertiser* of 1 April 1874, was that Cooktown would suffer the same fate as Maryborough, Gladstone and Rockhampton, where 'land sharks ... systematically picked up the best lots of every new township to hold them for an advance price and stuck the real inhabitants into corners'.[34] In the event, the Government decided — after a private deputation of Cooktown residents to the Lands Department — that claims would be allowed for improvements in excess of £50, provided such claims were lodged before the first land sale, scheduled for 19 May 1874.[35]

On the due day, 139 town allotments were offered by public auction at the upset price of £50 per acre for frontages on Charlotte Street and £12 10s per acre for allotments elsewhere (see Map 4.2 over). One hundred and thirty five of them sold for a total price of £2938, almost three times the upset value.[36] The highest price bid was £100 by Henry O'Reilly (through an agent) for an allotment on Charlotte Street; the lowest was £3 15s by one of the trustees of the Masonic Lodge for a small allotment on the corner of Helen and Furneaux Streets.[37] Contrary to the concerns expressed earlier, no 'land sharks' seem to have been present and most blocks seem to have been sold to those already in possession of them.

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33 As above in *CHPRA,* 20 May 1874, p. 3. Yet James Read had been sent by the authorities in Brisbane on the advice of A.C. Macmillan, who had telegraphed the Under-Secretary of Works in late December 1873 advising that the 'settlement now sufficiently advanced to warrant immediate survey of the town': see Macmillan to Under-Secretary of Works of 24 December 1873, in-letter 2458 of 1873, COL/A189, QSA.

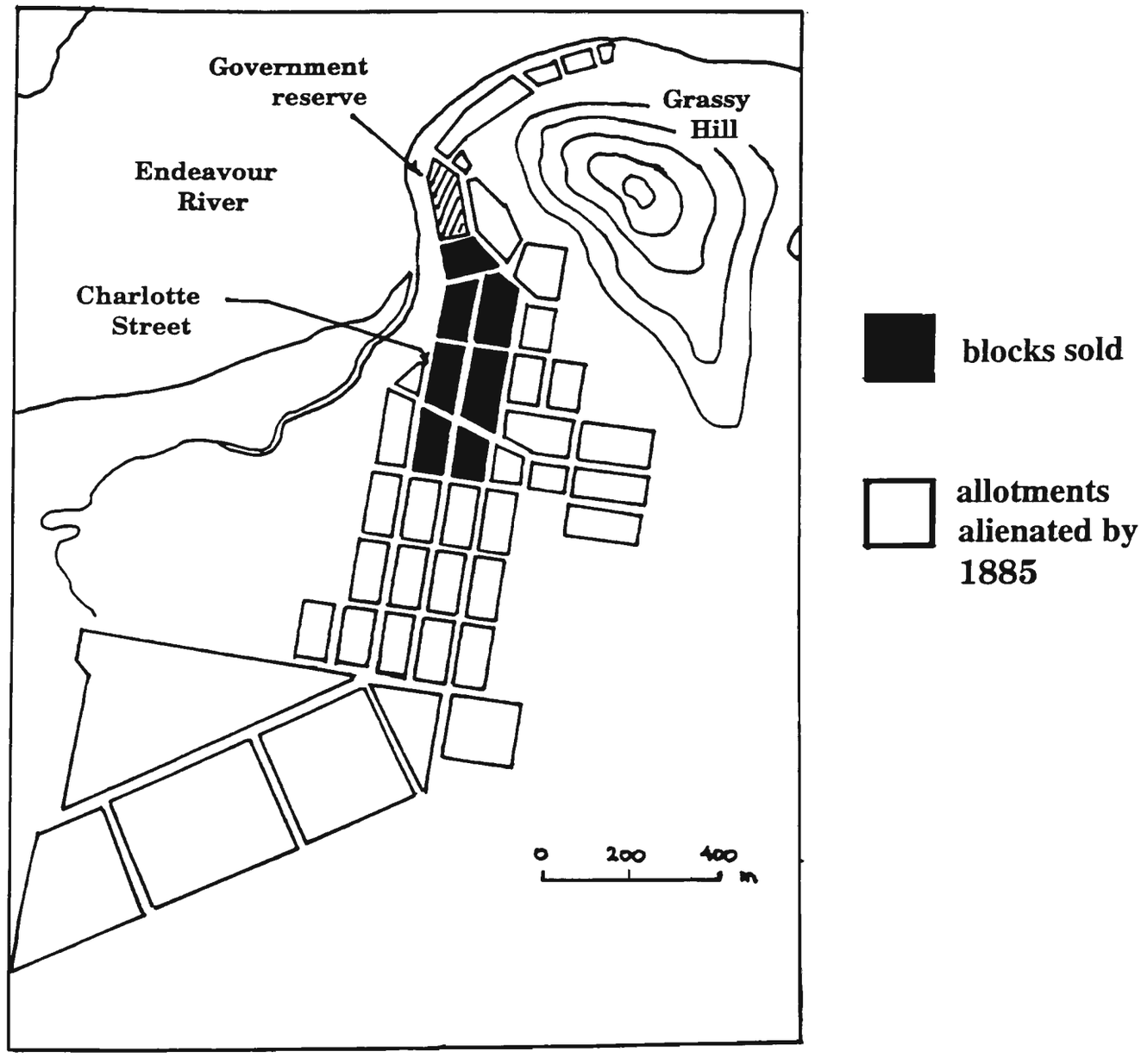
34 *CHPRA,* 1 April 1874, p. 2. For an account of earlier land speculation in the 1840s and 1850s, see H. Gregory, 'Squatters, selectors and — dare I say it — speculators', *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland,* 11, 4, 1983, pp. 74-87.

35 See *CHPRA,* 8 April 1874, p. 3.

36 As reported in *CHPRA,* 20 May 1874, p. 3.

37 See lots 2 and 102 respectively in *Register of the Sale of Crown Land by Public Auction* at Cooktown on 19 May 1874, LAN/A327, QSA.

Map 4.2 - Building Allotments Sold at the First Land Sale in Cooktown: 19 May 1874



Source: *Register of the Sale of Crown Land by Public Auction* at Cooktown on 19 May 1874, LAN/A327, QSA.

Coping with the Influx of Population

One of the immediate benefits of the land sale was that it gave successful purchasers the confidence to construct more substantial and more permanent businesses and dwellings. *The Cooktown Herald and Palmer River Advertiser,* in an editorial dated 17 June 1874, asserted that

> Those persons who were wont to regard the various places of business as "all front and calico" would be considerably

> astonished at the change which has already taken place ... since the Land Sale ... [and] by the numerous substantial buildings erected and even now in the course of erection.[38]

It is evident, however, that the sale of 135 building allotments would have gone only part of the way towards providing permanent accommodation for the estimated 1800 people then resident in Cooktown, especially given that half of the blocks were commercial sites in Charlotte Street. Indeed, assuming that all seventy blocks facing Charlotte Street ultimately had business premises erected upon them and that the remaining sixty-five blocks were sold for residential purposes (see Map 4.2 on previous page), it seems unlikely that the first land sale provided permanent accommodation for more than about 670 persons.[39] That calculation suggests that in May 1874 some 1130 other 'residents', most of whom were probably single white adult males, were living in tents or shanties either in areas reserved for government purposes or on the fringes of the land already surveyed and sold.[40]

Complicating the accommodation problem, of course, was the large transient population passing through Cooktown at any one time, either en route to the Palmer, returning to southern ports from the Palmer or simply visiting Cooktown from the Palmer to savour the 'bright lights'. As indicated earlier at Figure 4.1 (at page 142), the transient population was at times as high as around 2000, although that figure from April/May 1874 was unusually high and a result of heavy rains cutting access to the Palmer for several weeks, combined with the 'return rush' of April 1874. Moreover, most of that particular 2000 were camped either on the roadside on the southwestern outskirts of Cooktown, or on the road towards the Palmer rather than within the town itself.[41]

Apart from such brief concentrations, it seems likely that the daily transient population in Cooktown — including Chinese — rose from an

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38 *CHPRA,* 17 June 1874, p. 3.

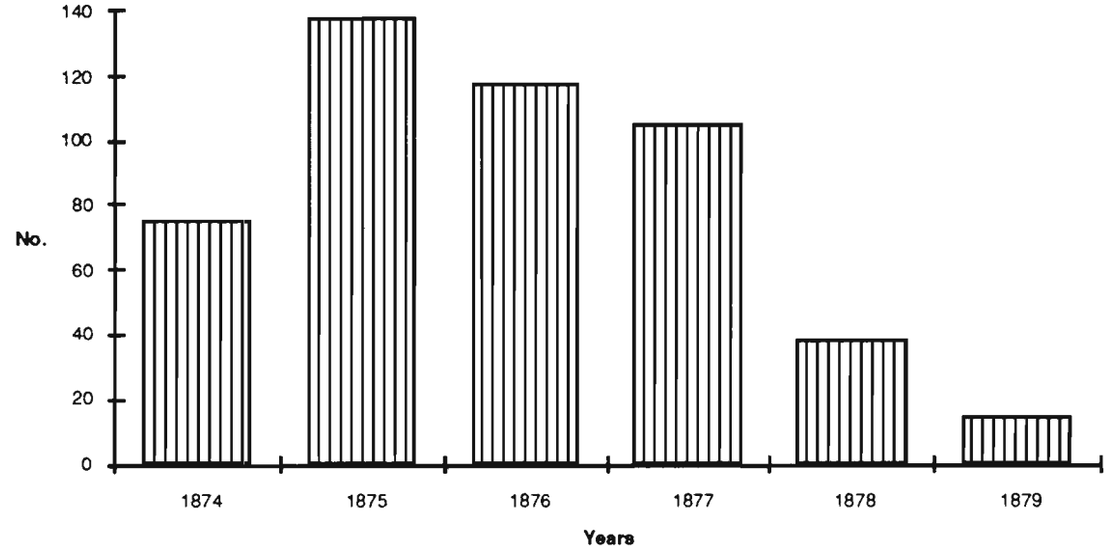
39 Assuming that each business premise provided accommodation for four persons and that each residential dwelling accommodated six persons, an assumption based on a variety of anecdotal accounts of early life in Cooktown.

40 The editorial in *The Cooktown Herald and Palmer River Advertiser* of 20 May 1874, for example, spoke of 'those who were left out in the cold' after the recent land sale: *CHPRA,* 20 May 1874, p. 3. Similarly, in a criminal prosecution before the magistrates' court on 27 May 1874, against two Cooktown residents who had unlawfully erected a dwelling on Crown land, the defendants' lawyer pointed out 'most of the population of Cooktown ... had no alternative but to occupy unalienated land until another sale should take place': *CHPRA,* 3 June 1874, p. 2.

41 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 25 March 1874, p. 2.

average of about seventy five in 1874 to close to double that number in 1875, before declining steadily thereafter as shown at Figure 4.2.

Figure 4.2 - Average Daily Transient Population in Cooktown: 1874-79



Source: Data derived from Table 4.2 (over).

The calculations to support those estimates are shown at Table 4.2 (over). They assume that a small proportion of new arrivals in Cooktown each year remained in the town, replacing those who departed either for southern ports or perhaps for the Palmer itself. They assume also that incoming transients stayed an average of three days in Cooktown, engaged in such activities as equipping themselves for the journey to the goldfields, buying supplies and equipment, and seeking travelling companions and the latest word on new discoveries.

The calculations similarly assume that departing transients stayed an average of four days in Cooktown, primarily to arrange their passage southwards or, in the case of the Chinese, back to Hong Kong or Canton. They also assume that around 30 per cent of the population of the goldfields made one visit to Cooktown in 1874, for an average of five days stay, either to transact business (as in the case of carriers and storekeepers) or simply to enjoy the relative comforts and lifestyle of the town. In the years thereafter, as the population on the goldfields became increasingly dominated by the Chinese, the percentage used has been decreased to 20 per cent in 1875 and

10 per cent per year thereafter (with all such assumptions based on anecdotal evidence from contemporary newspaper accounts and the like).

Table 4.2 - The Calculation of the Average Daily Transient Population in Cooktown: 1874-79

Serial	Factors	Notes	1874	1875	1876	1877	1878	1879
(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)	(g)	(h)	(i)
1	Population of Cooktown	1	2000	2200	2400	2600	3000	2300
2	Numbers arriving in Cooktown by ship	2	6200	11342	9616	7320	397	149
3	Number of arrivals remaining in Cooktown	3	600	660	720	780	120	45
4	Number of arriving transients	4	5600	10682	8896	6540	277	104
5	Number of days in Cooktown by arriving transients	5	16800	32046	26688	19620	831	312
6	Numbers departing Cooktown by ship	6	1500	3045	2591	2905	2437	1035
7	Number of Cooktown residents departing by ship	7	400	460	520	580	820	690
8	Number of departing transients	8	1100	2585	2071	2325	1617	345
9	Number of days in Cooktown by departing transients	9	4400	10340	8284	9300	6468	1380
10	Population of Palmer River and Hodgkinson goldfields	10	4000	8000	14410	19000	12982	7634
11	Number of Palmer River and Hodgkinson visitors to Cooktown per year	11	1200	1600	1440	1900	1300	760
12	Number of days in Cooktown by goldfields visitors	12	6000	8000	7200	9500	6500	3800
13	Total days in Cooktown by transients	13	27200	50386	42172	38420	13799	5492
14	**Average transient population in Cooktown per day**	14	**75**	**138**	**118**	**105**	**38**	**15**

Notes:

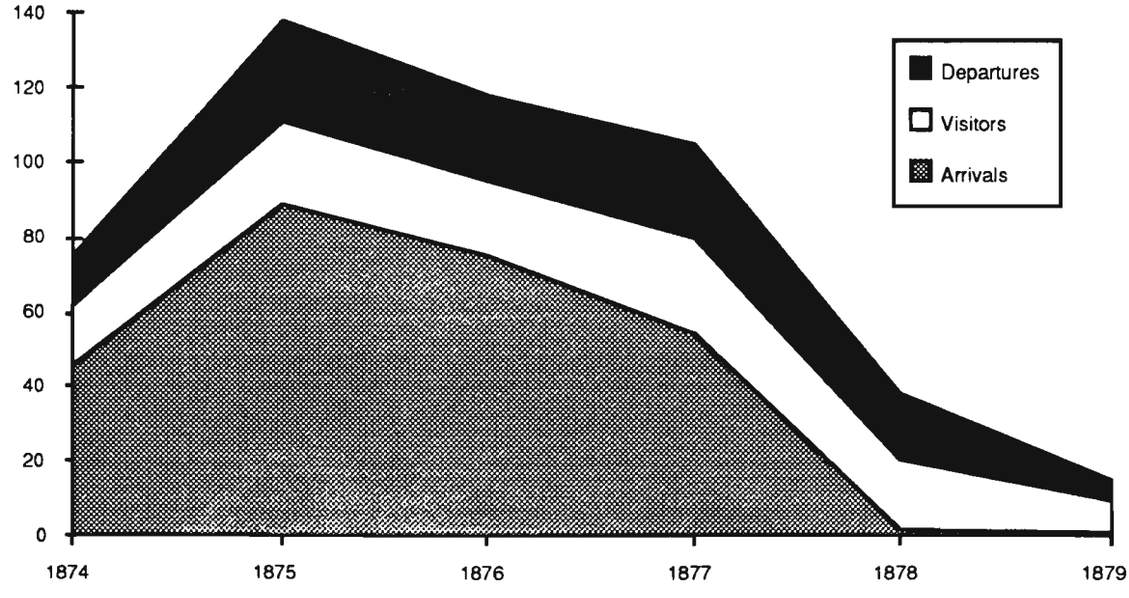
1. Data derived from statistical records and extrapolation, as at 31 December.
2. Data derived from immigration records, except for 1874 which is an estimation.
3. Assuming 30% of population of Cooktown (from serial 1) or 30% of numbers arriving (from serial 2), whichever the lesser.
4. Subtract serial 3 from serial 2.
5. Based on numbers from serial 4 multiplied by an average of three days.
6. Data derived from immigration records, except for 1874 which is an estimation.
7. Difference between number of arrivals and population of following year.

8. Subtract serial 7 from serial 6.
9. Based on numbers from serial 8 multiplied by an average of four days.
10. Data derived from statistical records, as at 31 December, except for 1874 which is an estimate.
11. Assuming 30% of the goldfields population paid one visit to Cooktown in 1874, 20% in 1875 and 10% thereafter (as the population increasingly became dominated by the Chinese).
12. Assuming average visit of five days.
13. Sum of serials 5, 9 and 12.
14. Serial 13 divided by 365.

Sources: *Votes and proceedings of the Legislative Assembly of Queensland [QVP]*, 2, 1876, pp. 451-2, 521 and 756; 2, 1877, pp. 970-1; 1, 1878, pp. 922-3; 1, 1879, pp. 1201-2 and 2, 1880, pp. 161-2.

Obviously, it is not being suggested that the figures are exact, given the assumptions being made. But they are probably reasonably indicative of the numbers and the trend across the period. Importantly also, the figures can be used (as shown at Figure 4.3 below) to illustrate the approximate *composition* of the average daily transient population, differentiating between 'arrivals', 'departures' and 'visitors'.

Figure 4.3 - The Composition of the Average Daily Transient Population in Cooktown: 1874-79



Source: Data derived from Table 4.2 (at page 151).

The significance of the differentiation is that 'arrivals' would presumably have been primarily interested in equipping themselves for the journey to the Palmer and for employment on the fields, and would probably have had little interest in spending their money on hotel accommodation or

'entertainment'.[42] Conversely, 'departures' — if they had been successful at the Palmer — would probably have been prepared to part with some of their hard-won earnings on entertainment, regardless of whether they were white or Chinese. 'Visitors', of course, would probably have been midway between the two. The interesting trend in Figure 4.3 at page 152 is that the number of 'arrivals' peaked in 1875 and declined drastically after 1877. The other significant trend is that the number of 'visitors' remained steady over the period 1874 to 1878, with concomitant implications for the 'entertainment' industry in Cooktown, albeit that the bulk of visitors from 1875 onwards were probably Chinese.

The point of this discussion is that in the formative years of 1874 and early 1875, Cooktown probably had a resident population of around 1000 white adults (predominantly male) living in temporary accommodation, as well as a daily transient population of around 100 adult white males. Indeed, what emerges in this chapter is that Cooktown's early business community was centred in large part on the 'service' needs of those two almost exclusively European groups, by way of restaurants, dining rooms, hotels, stores and boarding accommodation.

With the passage of time and further land sales, however, many of Cooktown's residents made the transition from temporary to permanent accommodation, thereby lessening their dependence on the business community, while the transient population increasingly came to be dominated by the Chinese.[43] The outcome was that many of the service businesses established in 1874 and 1875 struggled to survive, particularly in the face of keen competition from the close-knit Chinese business community. Against that background, this chapter now examines the history of the key non-government service industries in Cooktown, both in relation to commercial development and physical growth of the town.

Cooktown's Early Hotels

Probably no other aspect of Cooktown's early history has achieved the notoriety accorded to its hotels and 'grog shops', and associated dance-halls and brothels. As indicated earlier, however, much of the notoriety seems

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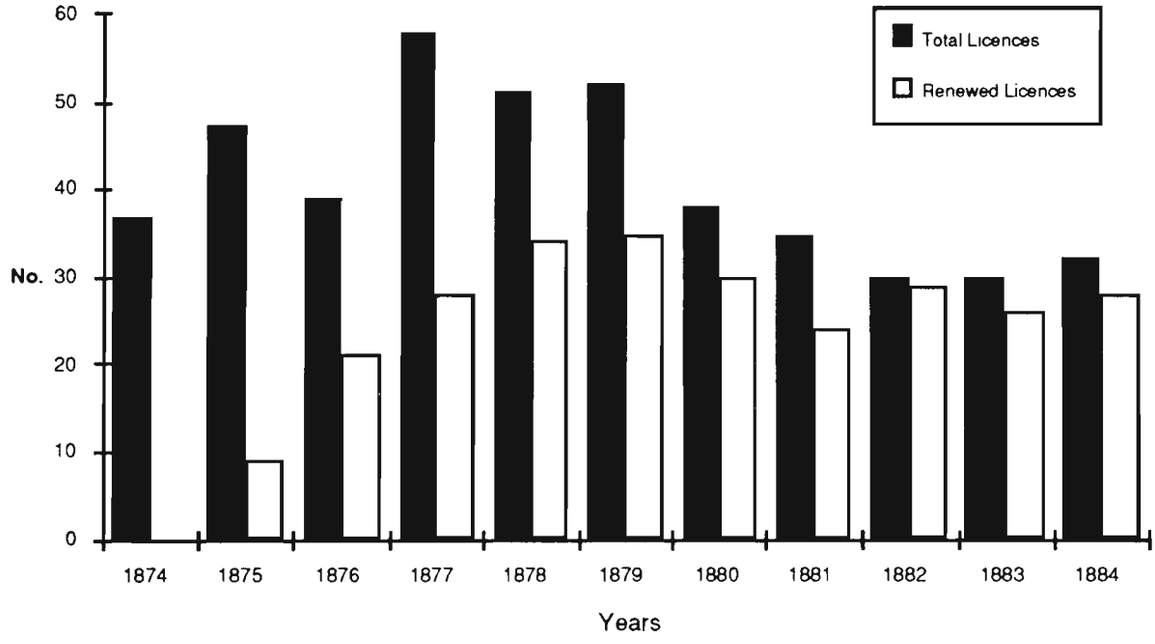
42 The reception and outfitting of Chinese arrivals is discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

43 The changing social, domestic and racial composition of Cooktown's population is discussed in detail in Chapter 5 'A Frontier Community'.

unwarranted and based largely on the ill-informed and exaggerated accounts of certain early visitors, whose primary interest was often in selling their story to a newspaper rather than a factual recording for posterity. Holthouse's description in *River of gold: the story of the Palmer River gold rush* of Cooktown's ninety-four licensed hotels, for example, seems to have been based on the April 1874 visit report of the Townsville correspondent to *The Brisbane Courier,* who claimed (incorrectly) that '65 public licences are issued and 30 more applied for'.[44] In reality, as can be seen from Figure 4.4 (below), the highest number of licences issued was fifty eight in the year to 30 June 1877 (and licences had to be renewed each financial year).

Figure 4.4 - Retail Spirit Licences Issued for Cooktown 1874-84



Source: Data derived from *Queensland Government Gazettes 1873-85.*

Even the number of licences issued, though, can be a misleading indication of the actual number of licensed premises. It is evident from contemporary accounts of *The Cooktown Courier* and *Cooktown Herald and Palmer River Advertiser* that a number of establishments operated for only a few months before either going out of business or relocating to the Palmer. Conversely, public-houses often changed hands several times in the course of

44 See *The Brisbane Courier,* 18 April 1874, p. 3.

a single year (as is particularly evident in the extremely low number of renewed licences in the 1875 figures at Figure 4.4). Accordingly, it seems probable that in the *calendar* year 1874 the total number of establishments which traded at some time during the year as a licensed hotel was around fifty (see Table 4.3 below), with the possibility of an additional twenty-three retail outlets operating for at least part of the year from stores etc.[45]

Table 4.3 - The Licensed Hotels Trading in Cooktown in 1874
(but not necessarily across the 12 months)

Albion	Gold Exchange	St Patricks
All Nations	Gulgong	Scandinavian
Australian	Gympie	Shamrock
Brighton	Hillside	Sovereign
British	Keyes	Tattersals
Cafe' de Paris	Leichhardt	Thames and Auckland
Captain Cook	Melbourne	Travellers Home
Cariboo	Northern Australian	Travellers Rest
Carniers Arms	Northern Star	Turf
Commercial	O'Grady's Sydney	Universal
Cosmopolitan	Post Office	Victoria
Criterion	Prince of Wales	Welcome
Diggers Arms	Queens	West Coast
Empire	Queensland	Wheatsheaf
Etheridge	Retreat	Whitehorse
European	Rock Inn	
Exchange	Royal	

Source: Derived primarily from *The Cooktown Courier* and *CHPRA*, April-December 1874.

Of those hotels listed at Table 4.3 above, only six had a female publican and only one — the *Queensland* — was run by a Chinese. Of the twenty-three other retail outlets, none was in the name of a female but four had a Chinese licensee. Only twenty-one of the forty-nine hotels listed 'survived' for more than five years (see Table 4.4 over) and only two — the *Sovereign* under Henry Poole and the *Welcome* under Mary O'Neill — were still operating with the same publican after ten years. By 1885, as can be

45 A visitor to Cooktown in February 1874, for example, noted that 'even the chemist keeps a grog shop': *The Brisbane Courier,* 20 February 1874, p. 3. The figure of twenty-three derived from a check of licences issued in 1874 and 1875 against the names of publicans from the hotels at Table 4.3.

seen from Figure 4.4 (publicans licences at page 154), the number of hotels trading in the town had probably dropped to less than thirty.[46]

Table 4.4 - The Major Licensed Hotels in Cooktown: 1874-85
(which traded for more than five consecutive years)

Name	Publican	Dates
Black Eagle	N. Armbrust	1878-85
Cafe' de Paris	C. Bouel	1874-78
Captain Cook	J. Neill	1874-85
Carriers Arms	numerous	1875-85
Cosmopolitan	numerous	1874-85
Criterion	D. Lane	1874-85
Diggers Arms	D. Galvin *et al*	1874-85
Gold Exchange	C. Bouel	1874-80
Great Northern	S. Balser	1877-85
Gympie	M. Wholohan	1874-79
Post Office	M. & F. Totten	1875-79
Queensland	See Wah	1874-83
Reynolds Family	T. & O. Reynolds	1876-85
Royal	M. Lynch	1874-85
Shamrock	A. Smith/M. Ruge	1874-85
Sovereign	H. Poole	1874-85
Tattersals	M. Wholohan *et al*	1874-85
Turf/Club	J. & E. Easdon	1874-79
Welcome	M. O'Neill	1875-85
West Coast	numerous	1874-85
White Horse	A. Thredgold/ A. Langeschwerdt	1874-80

Source: Derived primarily from *The Cooktown Courier* and *CHPRA*, 1874-85.

Initially, at least, most of licensed premises were prefabricated shanties sited along both sides of Charlotte Street, with several on the government reserve at the foot of Grassy Hill. In the lead up to the first land sale of 19 May 1874, those publicans with premises either on the west side of Charlotte Street or on reserves elsewhere felt themselves particularly disadvantaged by the decree from the local magistrates court that licences would only be renewed on 1 July for those premises erected on land duly purchased from the Crown.[47] After considerable complaint and lobbying, the

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46 In 1878, there were only twenty-five hotels listed in directories of Cooktown: see *Pugh's Queensland Almanac 1878,* Thorne, Brisbane, 1878, pp. 417-8.

47 See letter to Magistrate Hamilton published in *CHPRA,* 25 March 1874, p. 2.

court eventually decided to renew such licences, conditional on the premises being moved from reserved land 'when required' by the authorities.[48]

The pending land sale also brought the expectation from the authorities that publicans would henceforth construct more substantial dwellings and that such premises would need to satisfy the requirements of the *Licensing Act.* To that end, the local magistrates court in late April 1874 rejected all twenty-eight applications for the renewal of existing publicans licences on the grounds that not one of the premises provided the necessary accommodation required by the Act.[49] The court adjourned all applications until two weeks after the land sale, warning prospective publicans that by then they needed at a minimum to have arranged for the installation of at least one 'properly-constructed earth closet', a facility none of them currently had.[50]

In the event, the land sale triggered a building boom throughout Cooktown, not confined to the retail spirit industry. Renovated and new hotels, however, were at the forefront of the boom, with the new Sovereign Hotel for example, 'of an imposing nature and commodiously designed', as well as being the first two-storied building constructed in Cooktown.[51] Certainly, within the space of a few months, most of Cooktown's licensed hotels had made the transition to more permanent structures with practically all of them then offering, at a minimum, 'two sitting rooms and four bedrooms' as required by the Act.[52] It seems likely, therefore, based on an average occupancy of two persons per bedroom, that by late 1874 Cooktown's thirty-five or so hotels would have provided a reasonable standard of accommodation for about 300 persons, or some 10 per cent of Cooktown's resident population.[53] Of that total, only about ten places were in a 'Chinese' hotel.

The amount and type of liquor consumed on the various hotels is difficult to quantify. Moreover, 'drinking' as a form of entertainment, together

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48 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 18 July 1874, p. 3.

49 See *CHPRA,* 29 April 1874, p. 2.

50 That ruling made something of a mockery of the earlier advertisement, for example, of the Australian Hotel offering 'a fine range of bedrooms, also spacious and airy dining rooms ... and assembly rooms for private or professional use': see *CHPRA,* 15 April 1874, p. 1.

51 See *CHPRA,* 17 October 1874, p. 2.

52 At least five hotels had six bedrooms and one had eight: as advertised in *The Cooktown Courier* and *CHPRA,* July-December 1874.

53 The prospects of comparing that percentage against other northern towns, such as Townsville and Cardwell, are discussed later in this chapter.

with the associated 'ills' of gambling, billiard playing, dance-hall entertainments and prostitution, are examined in more detail in Chapter 5 'A Frontier Community'.[54] It is perhaps suffice at this stage to note at Table 4.5 (below) an example of one week's supply of alcoholic beverages passing through the customs house at Cooktown in early 1875, although what proportion was destined for the Palmer is obviously unclear.[55] It is, however, probably indicative of the levels of consumption by some in Cooktown to note that in May 1874 alone, '12 lunatics were committed to [the reception house at] Rockhampton due to intemperance'![56]

Table 4.5 - An Example of Alcoholic Beverages Imported through Cooktown in January 1875
(from the shipping records for one week)

Item	Container	Quantity
Brandy	cases	179
Beer	kegs	52
Wine	casks	7
Ale	hogshead	18
Ale	cases	10
Rum	cases	10
Port	casks	2
Stout	cases	30
Schnapps	cases	10
Champagne	cases	2

Source: *CHPRA*, 27 January 1875, p. 2.

Finally, it is useful to recall that hotels in country towns during that era often played an important civic role in providing a venue for public meetings, official dinners and receptions, and community-wide social functions. Several of the larger hotels in Cooktown, for example, boasted 'assembly rooms' and regularly hosted public meetings, social functions and receptions for visiting dignitaries, which in more developed centres would probably have been held in a town hall or council building.[57]

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54 The 'commerce' aspects of the retail spirit industry are discussed later in this chapter under 'Traders and Storekeepers'.

55 Cooktown also had its own brewery producing 'Bolger's hop beer': see advertisement in *CHPRA*, 15 April 1874, p. 1.

56 *CHPRA*, 6 May 1874, p. 3.

57 The Australian Hotel, for example, was the frequent venue for public meetings throughout late 1874 and 1875: see, for example, *CHPRA*, 16 September 1874, p. 2 for a public meeting called to discuss improving access to the Palmer.

Early Commerce in the Town

Most early accounts of the commercial development of Cooktown typically described the large number and variety of stores operating in the town, the almost frenzied rate of daily business activity and the importance of Cooktown as the key entry point and resupply centre for the Palmer River goldfields. A closer analysis of the role played by traders, storekeepers and carriers in the town — as will be addressed shortly — indicates a somewhat different reality. It seems, for example, that once past the initial rush to the Palmer of late 1873/early 1874, very few of the traders and storekeepers in Cooktown were actually involved — in a commercial sense — in the ongoing resupply of diggers at the Palmer. Indeed, by about late 1874, the important business links to the Palmer were in the hands of probably five or six wholesale agents in Cooktown, with the remaining traders and storekeepers in the town confined primarily to the daily needs of the residents of Cooktown itself.

Most popular accounts of early Cooktown similarly underplayed the importance of the Chinese business community in the town, frequently relegating the Chinese to a peripheral role as minor storekeepers and occasional market gardeners, with the more critical accounts dwelling on the evils of their gambling and opium dens, and the supposed illicit export of Palmer gold to China. In reality, the Chinese business community in Cooktown — across the years 1875 to 1880 at least — was almost certainly wealthier and commercially more influential than the 'white' business community and, indeed, largely displaced the role of the handful of wholesale agents who had come to dominate Cooktown's commercial activities by late 1874. By the early 1880s, however, with the continued decline of the Palmer and associated goldfields, Cooktown's Chinese business community likewise contracted and eventually withered, leaving the commercial activity of the town once again in the hands of small-scale traders and storekeepers.

The exodus of the Chinese business community, with the demise of the Palmer, exacerbated the perception in the minds of many white residents and other Queenslanders alike that the Chinese had 'plundered' the mineral wealth of North Queensland, with little or no return to the state.[58] Again, in reality, a closer analysis of the cost components involved in the typical

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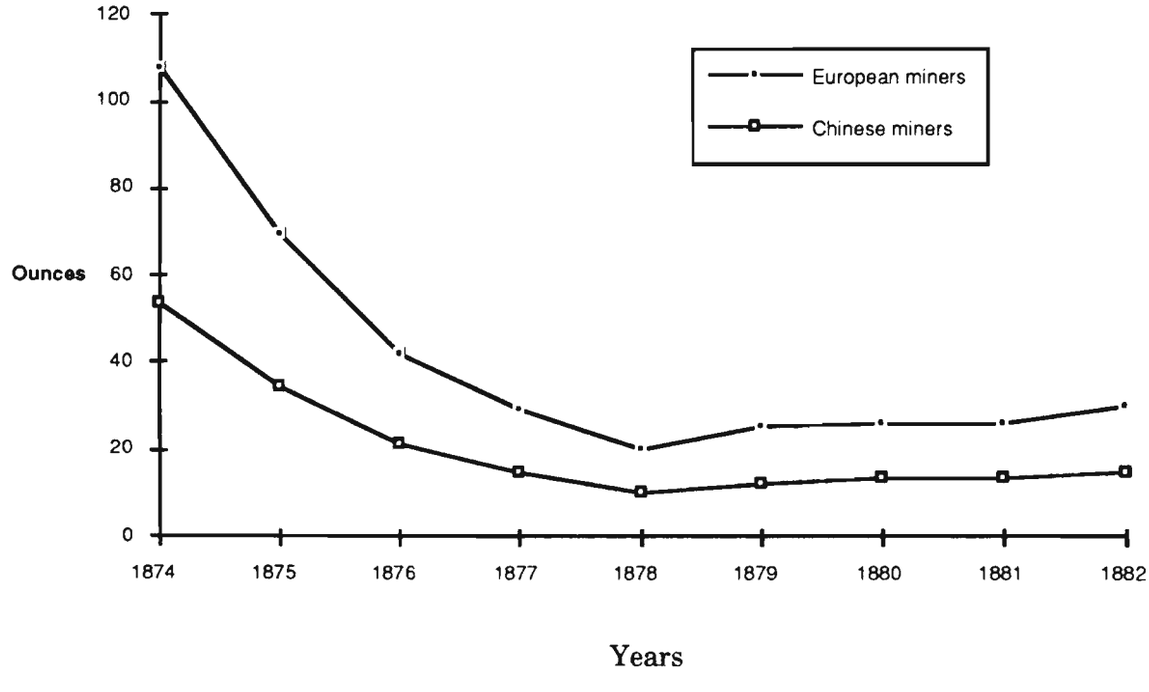
58 The implications of this perception, in terms of its impact on the emergent 'White Australia' policy, are discussed in more detail at Chapter 7 'Boom to Bust'.

production of a nominal one ounce of gold by a Chinese miner on the Palmer — as will be discussed shortly — suggests that around one third of its value was paid to Queensland or Cooktown-based 'white' suppliers and that, even if eventually exported or smuggled to China, over half its value remained in Queensland (albeit not necessarily in European hands).

The Quantification of Commercial Activity

The difficulty in attempting to quantify the assertions of the preceding paragraphs is obviously the paucity of data. It does seem possible, however, using a combination of statistical sources, contemporary accounts and reasonable assumptions to build up an *indicative* portrayal of several of the key elements of commercial life in Cooktown in the 1870s.[59] To that end, a useful starting point (albeit one somewhat removed from daily life in Cooktown) is to identify the yearly average yield of gold produced by both Chinese and European miners on the Palmer River goldfields across the period 1874-82 (see Figure 4.5).

Figure 4.5 - Estimated Annual Productivity of Miners on the Palmer River Goldfields 1874-82



Source: Calculated by dividing average number of miners by amount of gold produced. Yearly gold production figures and population numbers from *QVP*, 1874-82. Also assumes that European miners generally produced around double the quantity of gold than Chinese miners, based on anecdotal evidence that Europeans would move to other fields when yields fell below about one ounce per week.

59 The acknowledged risk in using 'reasonable assumptions' in quantification is that minor errors can become seriously compounded.

The significance of Figure 4.5 (on the previous page) is twofold. First, it graphically illustrates that the peak years were 1874 and 1875 in terms of yields per man (overall production also peaked in 1875 at 250,400 ounces, declining thereafter at the rate of about 30,000 ounces per year). Second, it shows that the average yield per white miner had fallen by 1876 to 40 ounces per year and for the Chinese miner to around 20 ounces per year.[60] Given that the white and Chinese miner needed to produce around 37 and 15 ounces respectively, just to cover their annual expenses (see Table 4.6 below), it seems therefore that for most miners, white or Chinese, the Palmer River goldfields were on the point of being unviable by around late 1876.[61]

Table 4.6 - Annual Operating Expenses for European and Chinese Miners on the Palmer River Goldfields circa 1876

Item	Notes	Cost for European Miner (£)	Cost for Chinese Miner (£)
(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)
Passage to Cooktown	1	2.5	6.7
Initial issue of mining equipment	2	6	1.7
Maintenance items (clothing, bedding etc)	-	7.5	5.0
Food	3	125	30.0
Indenture charges	4	-	13.0
Total (£)	-	141	56.4
Gold equivalent (ozs)	5	37.6	15.04

Notes: 1. £2/10/- is cost for European miner of one-way sea passage Brisbane-Cooktown or Cooktown-Brisbane, on the assumption that most who arrived by sea departed the Palmer overland for the south or reached the Palmer initially overland from the Etheridge. Chinese figure amortises cost of £10 for return passage Hong Kong-Cooktown-Hong Kong for 18-month visit.

2. Assumes issue of only basic items to Chinese ie pick or shovel and pan, whereas European miners would also need tentage, blankets etc.

3. Foodstuffs based on requirement for £2/10/- per week for European and 12s per week for Chinese (some accounts put the European requirements at between £3/10/- and £4).

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60 The difference is based on the fact that white miners were prepared to 'prospect', whereas Chinese miners largely worked abandoned white claims, sometimes for the second or third 're-working': See, for example, *The Cooktown Courier,* 10 August 1878, p. 2.

61 This assertion has important implications for continuing Chinese immigration to Cooktown, as will be discussed in Chapter 7 'Boom to Bust'.

4. Assumes that two-thirds of Chinese miners would have been indentured to a financier to the value of about £65 (£10 for passage, £45 for food, £10 for equipment and bedding etc) over 18 months; interest based on annual repayment of around 30%.

5. Gold equivalent calculated on sale value of £3/15/- per ounce, which was the 'standard'.

Source: Estimated costs derived from a wide variety of sources but primarily *The Cooktown Courier* and *CHPRA*, 1874-79.

The second exercise, bringing the subject calculations closer to Cooktown, is to estimate what proportions of the annual operating expenses of individuals were spent at the Palmer, in Cooktown, in Queensland and in China, and to differentiate between proportions paid by way of government charges and to private enterprise. Table 4.7 (below) shows those calculations for a European miner, while Table 4.8 (over) shows the calculations for a Chinese.

Table 4.7 - Estimated Cost Components in One Year's Production of Gold by a European Miner on the Palmer River circa 1876
(assuming an annual production of 40 ounces and a value of £4 per ounce)

Cost Components	Notes	Goods or Services paid to a resident of Queensland (£) *1	Payments to shipping companies (£) *2	Customs duties (Cooktown) (£) *3	Payments to Cooktown-based supplier (£) *4	Costs of carriage (Cooktown to Palmer) (£) *5	Payments to Palmer-based supplier (£) *6	Total (£)
(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)	(g)	(h)	(i)
One-way passage of individual	7	-	2.5	-	-	-	-	2.5
Initial purchase of mining equip-ment, tentage etc	8	4.49	0.16	0.45	0.9	-	-	6
Maintenance items (clothes, bedding etc)	9	2.24	0.19	0.56	1.13	2.25	1.13	7.5
Food (@ £2/10/- per week)	10	37.49	3.13	9.38	18.75	37.5	18.75	125
Profit/wages of individual	11	9	-	-	-	-	-	9
Sale of gold	12	-	-	-	5	-	5	10
Total (£)	-	53.22	5.98	10.39	25.78	39.75	24.88	160

Notes: 1. Column (c) figures derived by subtracting sum of columns (d) to (h) inclusive from column (i). Note that a proportion of the total could well have gone to New South Wales or Victoria - see notes 8 and 10 to follow.

2. Column (d) figures, with the exceptions of first item, represent 2.5% of total at column (i). First item represents 100% of total.

3. Column (e) figures represent 7.5% of total at column (i).

4. Column (f) figures represent 15% of total at column (i).

5. Column (g) figures represent 30% of total at column (i).

6. Column (h) figures represent 15% of total at column (i).

7. Assumes, based on anecdotal accounts, that half of all European miners either reached the Palmer via the Etheridge or, if they arrived by sea via Cooktown, departed the Palmer overland for the south.

8. Assumes items procured by Cooktown-based supplier from Brisbane. There is, of course, evidence to suggest that the coastal shipping service diverted a good deal of trade from Brisbane to Sydney or Melbourne.

9. Assumes half the items supplied by Cooktown-based supplier and half by Palmer-based supplier.

10. As above, and that all foodstuffs imported from Brisbane or southern ports.

11. Assumes that individual is progressively able to sell 40 ounces of gold at £3/15/- per ounce, while paying for equipment, maintenance items and foodstuffs on ongoing basis.

12. Assumes that bankers or dealers at the Palmer and Cooktown are each then able to sell the gold at £3/17/6 and £4 respectively.

Sources: Percentages used and the estimated cost of the various components derived from a wide variety of sources but primarily *The Cooktown Courier* and *CHPRA*, 1874-79.

Table 4.8 - Estimated Cost Components in One Year's Production of Gold by a Chinese Miner on the Palmer River circa 1876
(assuming an annual production of 20 ounces and a value of £4 per ounce)

Cost Components	Notes	Goods or Services paid to a resident of China (£) *1	Goods or services paid to a resident of Queensland (£) *2	Payments to shipping companies (£) *3	Customs duties (Cooktown) (£) *4	Payments to Cooktown-based Chinese financier (£) *5	Costs of carriage (Cooktown to Palmer) (£) *6	Total (£)
(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)	(g)	(h)	(i)
Return passage of individual	7	-	-	6.7	-	-	-	6.7
Initial issue of mining equipt.	8	-	1.19	0.04	0.13	0.34	-	1.7
Maintenance items (clothing, bedding etc)	9	1.0	1.0	0.13	0.37	1.0	1.5	5.0
Food (@ 12s per week)	10	12.0	-	0.75	2.25	6.0	9.0	30.0
Interest/admin. charges to financier	11	6.5	-	-	-	6.5	-	13.0
Profit/wages of individual	12	18.6	-	-	-	-	-	18.6
Sale/export of gold to China by financier	13	-	-	-	0.75	4.25	-	5.0
Total (£)	-	38.1	2.19	7.62	3.50	18.09	10.5	80.0

Notes:

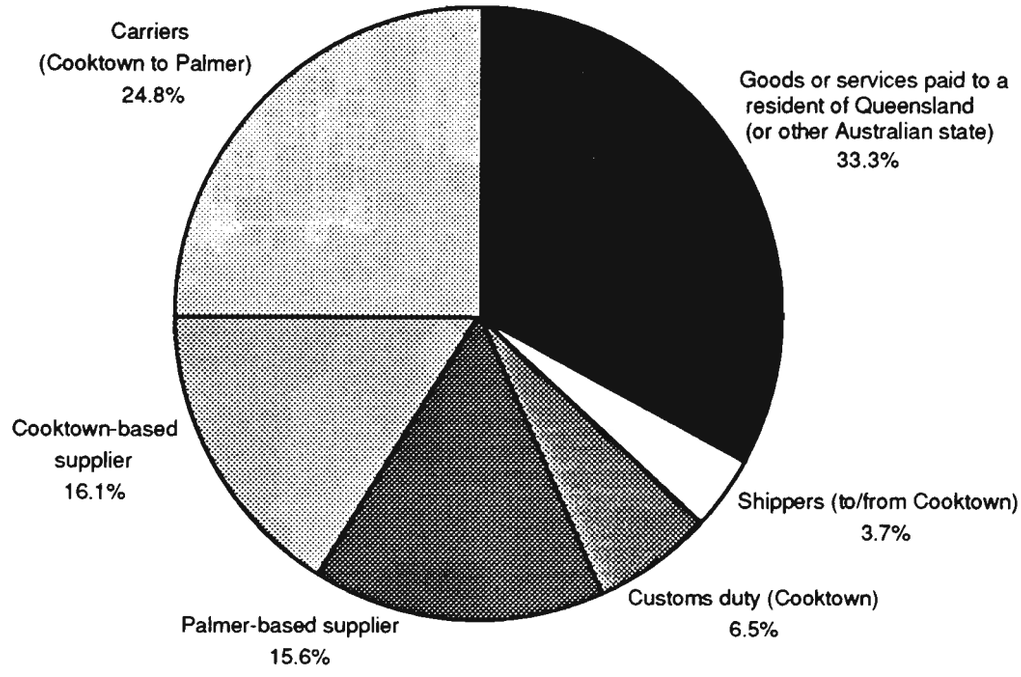
1. Column (c) figures derived by subtracting sum of columns (d) to (h) inclusive from column (i).
2. Column (d) figures derived by subtracting sum of columns (c) plus (e) to (h) inclusive from column (i). Note that a proportion of the total could well have gone to New South Wales or Victoria — see notes 8 and 9 to follow.
3. Column (e) figures, with the exception of first item, represent 2.5% of total at column (i). First item represents 100% of total.
4. Column (f) figures represent 7.5% of total at column (i).
5. Column (g) figures represent 20% of total at column (i).
6. Column (h) figures represent 30% of total at column (i).
7. Amortises assumed cost of £10 for return passage Hong Kong-Cooktown-Hong Kong for 18-month visit.
8. Assumes issue of basic items ie pick, shovel, and pan, purchased by financier from Brisbane, although some could have been supplied direct from Sydney or Melbourne.
9. Assumes 50% of items procured from China, 50% from Brisbane (although some could have come direct from Sydney or Melbourne).
10. Assumes all foodstuffs imported from China or grown locally by Chinese market gardeners and small-scale farmers.
11. Assumes that two-thirds of all Chinese miners were indentured to a financier to the value of £65 over 18 months; interest based on annual repayment of around 30%. Cooktown-based financier would need to pay China-based agent at least half for administrative tasks involved in arranging the indenture and passage to Cooktown.
12. Assumes that individual could sell 20 ounces of gold at £3/15/0 per ounce to his financier and, after repaying any indenture debt, return to China with the difference.
13. Assumes that financier sends half the produced gold back to China and retains the other half in Cooktown for business purposes or hoarding.

Sources: As for Table 4.7 at page 162.

By translating the totals from Table 4.7 (at page 162) into graphical format, it can then be seen at Figure 4.6 (over) that the Government probably received some 6.5 per cent of the eventual retail value of every ounce of gold mined at the Palmer River by a European miner, and that suppliers and carriers operating out of Cooktown received the equivalent of around 41 per cent of its worth for goods and services. Obviously also, the total value of European-mined gold remained in Queensland (with the possible exception of

goods purchased in southern states or monies paid to Sydney-based shipping companies).

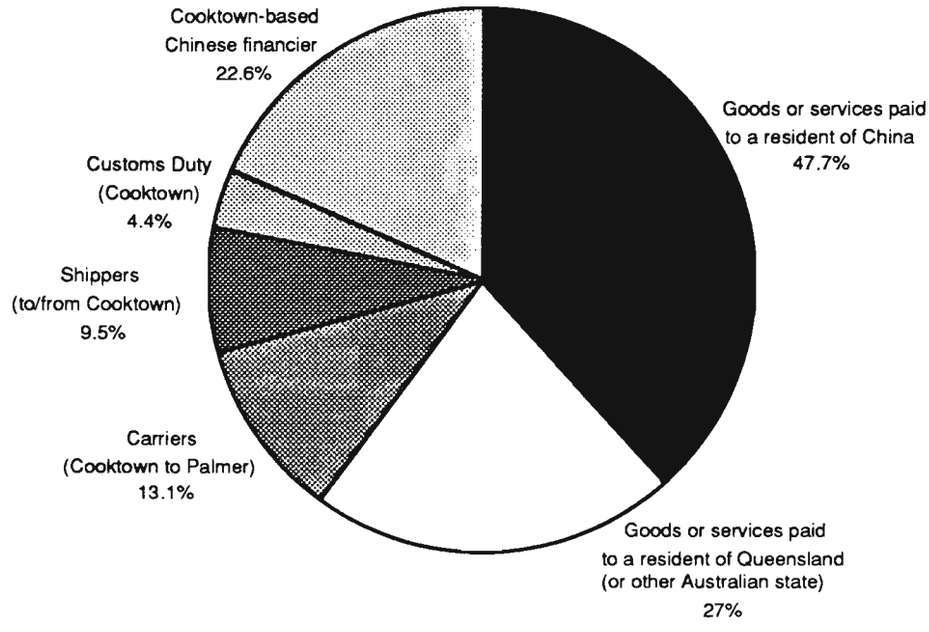
Figure 4.6 - Estimated Cost Components of European-produced Gold on the Palmer River circa 1876
(for each one ounce of gold)



Source: Data derived from Table 4.7 (at page 162).

Similarly, it can be seen from the estimates at Figure 4.7 (over) that the Government probably received only about 4.4 per cent of the value of each ounce of gold mined by a Chinese digger, that just over 50 per cent of its value remained in Queensland (albeit some 22 per cent in the hands of a Chinese financier in Cooktown) and that just under 50 per cent most likely ended up in China.

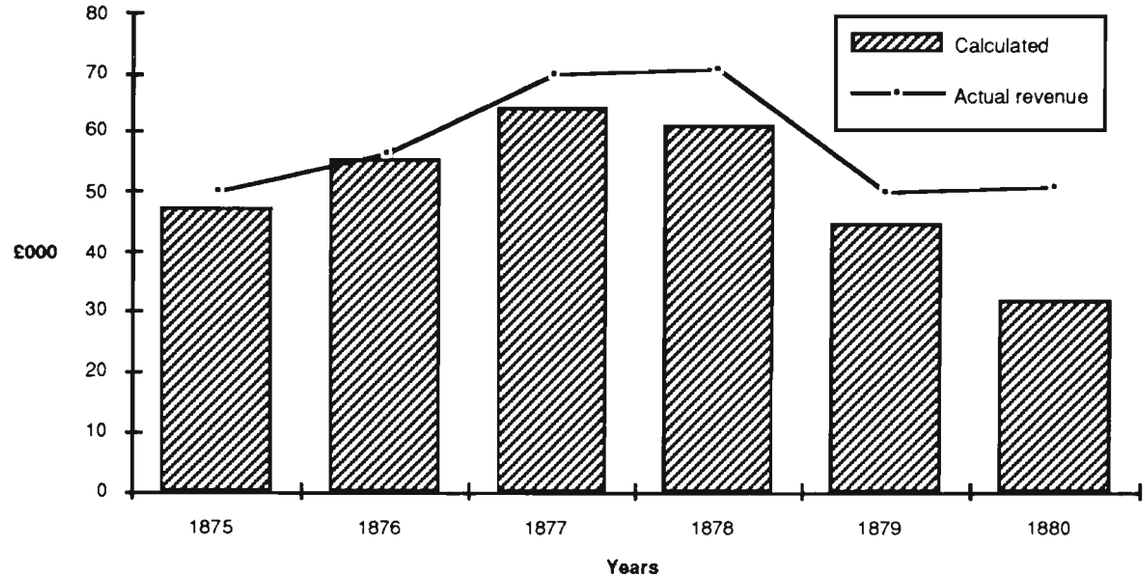
Figure 4.7 - Estimated Cost Components of Chinese-produced Gold on the Palmer River circa 1876
(for each one ounce of gold)



Source: Data derived from Table 4.8 (at page 163).

Before proceeding further with what some may see as increasingly theoretical or hypothetical calculations, it is probably useful to test the validity of the figures to date against some known statistics. Taking the estimate of customs duty paid at Cooktown, for example, from Tables 4.7 and 4.8 (at pages 162 and 163 respectively) and multiplying it by the average number of miners on the Palmer between 1875 and 1880, together with the population of Cooktown, indicates that the calculated and actual revenue figures are reasonably similar (see Figure 4.8 over), giving a fair level of confidence in the methodology employed.

Figure 4.8 - Comparison of Actual Customs Revenue against Estimate Calculated from Tables 4.6 and 4.7

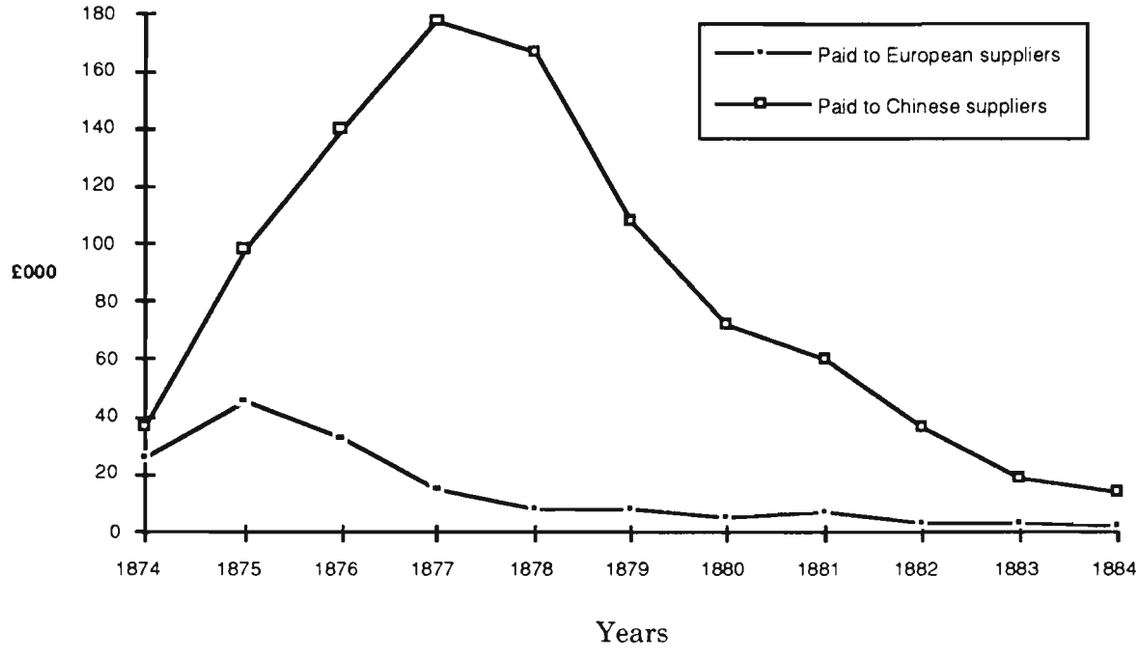


Source: Estimates from Tables 4.6 and 4.7 on pages 162 and 163 respectively. Actual revenue from *QVP*, 1875-81.

Traders and Merchants

On that basis, it seems reasonable to extrapolate two further sets of figures, namely the amounts paid to Cooktown-based suppliers and separately to carriers plying between Cooktown and the Palmer. In regards to the first, Figure 4.9 (over) shows estimates of the amounts paid to Cooktown-based suppliers across the period 1874-84, derived from the earlier calculations at Tables 4.7 and 4.8, multiplied by the average number of miners on the Palmer River goldfields. The striking trends are the dominance of the market by Chinese suppliers in the period 1875-79, the rapid decline of the Chinese thereafter and the downturn in Palmer trade with European suppliers after 1875.

Figure 4.9 - Estimates of the Amounts Paid to Cooktown-based Suppliers by Miners on the Palmer River Goldfields 1874-84



Source: Tables 4.7 and 4.8 at pages 162 and 163 respectively, and population of the goldfields figures from *QVP*, 1875-85. For the purposes of this calculation, it has been assumed that two-thirds of Chinese miners on the Palmer were indentured (and therefore paid interest to a Cooktown-based financier). In reality, the figure was probably nearer to 75 per cent, which would marginally inflate the upper graph line.

Figure 4.9 does not, of course, present a complete picture of trade between Cooktown wholesalers and the Palmer. It does not include supplies sold by European traders in Cooktown to carriers operating between the two centres. Nor does it indicate the market share of Palmer River-based traders or merchants on the Hodgkinson goldfields, many of whom operated as the agents of Cooktown-based traders. Nor does it include supplies sold within Cooktown itself by either European or Chinese traders to smaller, retail outlets. Those exclusions aside, the underlying trend remains the dominance of the market by Chinese suppliers.[62]

The Chinese Business Community

Certainly, even a cursory examination of *The Cooktown Courier* and *The Cooktown Herald and Palmer River Advertiser* across the period 1875-76

62 Indeed, that trend would be even more marked had not the assumption been made, for the purposes of calculations in Figure 4.9, that only half all Chinese immigrants to Cooktown across the period were indentured labourers. If a higher proportion of indentured immigrants were to be used, the top of the curve in Figure 4.9 would nudge the £200,000 mark.

quickly reveals the enormous volume of goods imported into Cooktown, primarily from Hong Kong, by Chinese traders in support of Chinese miners on the Palmer. Table 4.9 below, for example, is an extract from the shipping manifests of a mere two vessels, the *SS Japan* and *SS Scotland,* which arrived in Cooktown from Hong Kong in early May 1875, carrying *inter alia* in excess of 16,000 bags of rice.[63]

Table 4.9 - Typical Cargoes Arriving in Cooktown from Chinese Ports in 1875
(extracted from the manifests of two vessels)

Vessel	Rice (bags)	Flour (bags)	Gen. M'dise (boxes)	Tea (boxes)	Oil (cases)	Tobacco (boxes)	Opium (cases)	Sugar (boxes)	Cooktown-based Trader
Japan	400	-	86	-	-	-	-	-	*Cheong Loong*
Japan	1000	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	*Man Tong On*
Japan & Scotland	7753	3464	1118	80	70	12	6	470	*Kum Chung On & Co.*
Japan & Scotland	800	-	180	8	15	3	1	107	*Sun Tung Lee & Co.*
Japan	1000	-	351	-	-	-	2	-	*Kwong Fong*
Japan	500	-	248	-	-	-	-	-	*Too Chong*
Japan	300	-	90	-	-	-	8	-	*Kwong Loo Chong*
Japan	2000	-	426	-	-	-	2	-	*Kwong Hon Long*
Scotland	1000	100	-	10	30	2	-	25	*Kwong Foong June & Co.*
Scotland	400	-	-	-	20	-	2	-	*Cheong Leong*
Scotland	620	5	-	-	-	-	-	-	*Wing On & Co.*
Scotland	300	-	-	45	40	5	8	-	*Kwong Wu Cheong & Co.*
Scotland	638	-	-	-	10	-	-	-	*Lee Tuck Yet*
Total	16711	3569	2499	143	185	22	30	602	-

Source: *CHPRA,* 5 May 1875, p. 2 and 12 May 1875, p. 2.

A more detailed analysis of the same newspapers suggests that the Chinese business community in Cooktown across the period 1876-79 comprised about twelve major traders, with a further half dozen or so

63 These were not one-off shipments, but typical of the cargoes arriving every two to three weeks. The *SS Estepona,* for example, arrived with 10,060 bags of rice in early August 1875: see *CHPRA,* 7 August 1875, p. 2. The issue of calls for a duty on rice imports, in the context of restricting Chinese immigration, are discussed in Chapter 7 'Boom to Bust'.

medium-size merchants and countless smaller storekeepers and speciality stores. On that basis, it seems possible that the major traders listed at Table 4.10 below *each* had an annual turnover in the peak years 1876-78 of at least £12,000.[64] Across those same years, probably four or five major European traders had to compete for their share of a Palmer River market (see Figure 4.9 at page 168) which fell from an estimated £46,400 in 1875 to £8,120 in 1878 (albeit that the downturn in trade with the Palmer was offset in part by the opening of the Hodgkinson fields in 1876).[65]

Table 4.10 - The Major Chinese Traders in Cooktown 1876-79

Kum Chung On & Co	Kwong Hong & Co
Kwong Foong June & Co	Chew Lee & Co
Kwong Wo Chung & Co	Sun Tung Lee *1
Kwong Han Long	Wing On & Co *2
Sun Ye Lee & Co	Gee Woh Chong & Co
Sun Yee Lee & Co	Yuet Hing Wo

Notes: 1. His premises burnt down in somewhat suspicious circumstances, possibly the work of a competitor, in October 1875: see *CHPRA*, 16 October 1875, p. 2.

2. His premises, and stock valued at £12,000 similarly destroyed in August 1875: see *CHPRA*, 11 August 1875, p. 2.

The Carriers

On the amount of money potentially paid to carriers operating between Cooktown and the Palmer, Figure 4.10 (over) shows that the annual sum could have been as high as £140,000 in 1877. Moreover, that figure would have been the sum just to keep the workforce in rations and other essential supplies, albeit that the total would have been apportioned between the four means of transport used to convey goods to the Palmer, namely bullock-drawn drays, horse-drawn wagons, pack-horses and human porterage.

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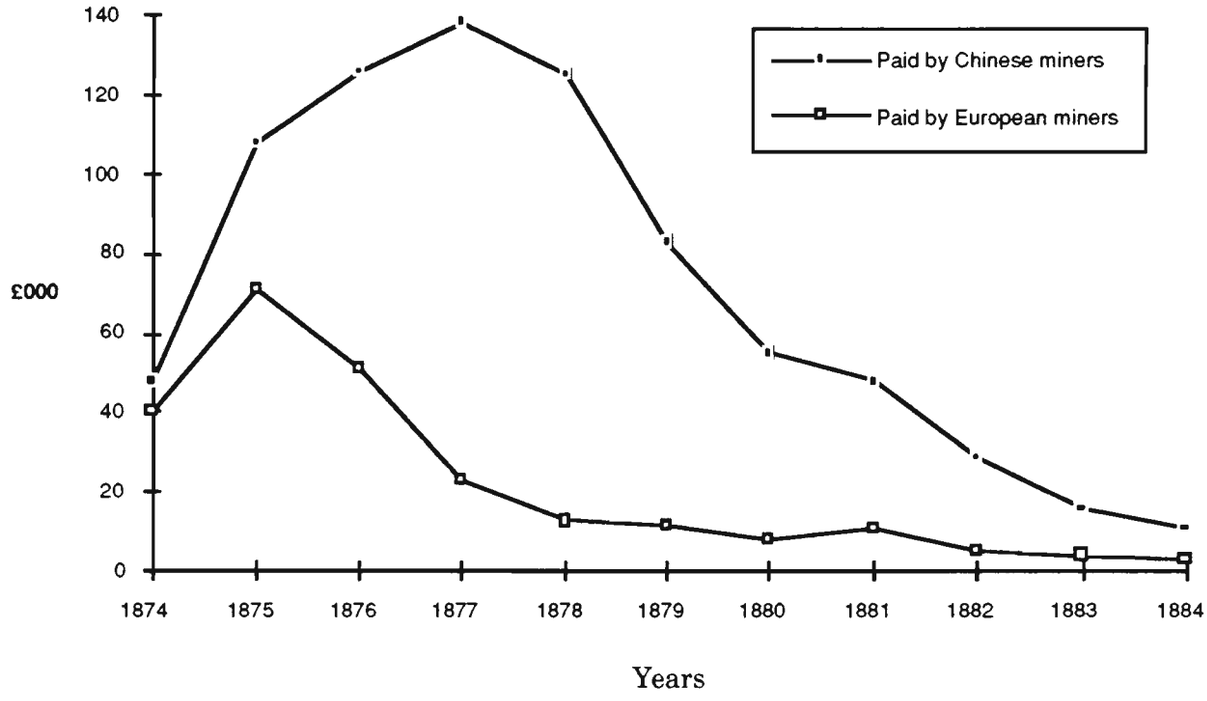
64 Calculated on the basis that the estimated Chinese share of the trade at Figure 4.9 (at page 168) across the years 1876-78 was respectively £130,248, £198,990 and £194,467.

65 The key figures in the European business community are discussed in some detail in Chapter 5 'A Frontier Community'.

Figure 4.10 - Estimates of the Amounts Paid to Carriers Operating between Cooktown and the Palmer River Goldfields 1874-84



Source: Tables 4.7 and 4.8 at pages 162 and 163 respectively, and population of the goldfields figures from *QVP*, 1875-85.

Certainly, there are numerous reports of Chinese 'coolies' being used to carry loads of around 120 pounds from Cooktown to the Palmer diggings. One of the early white carriers noted in his reminiscences that

> The Chinese storekeepers generally packed their goods by their own countrymen, who carried them in baskets hung on bamboo sticks across their shoulders.[66]

It seems unlikely, however, that would-be Chinese miners were used as porters other than on their first trip to the Palmer, given that they were probably more profitably employed as miners.[67] Moreover, the sheer volume of goods required to resupply the Chinese workforce would have required a more substantial carrying capacity than individual porters.[68]

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66 See W.H. Corfield, *Reminiscences of Queensland 1862-99,* Frater, Brisbane, 1921, p. 54. But see also the comment made at a public meeting in April 1878 that '[many] Europeans earn a living by packing for them: *The Cooktown Courier,* 27 April 1878, p. 3.

67 Some reports suggest, however, that as many as 500 Chinese were employed as packers or carriers by 1879: see *The Cooktown Courier,* 24 September 1879, p. 2.

68 In mid 1876, for example, the resupply requirements of the 15,000 Chinese miners on the Palmer would have amounted to 4888 tons per year (based on a daily requirement of 2 lb per man). That would have required a full-time workforce of 5703 porters, each carrying 120 lbs per trip and making sixteen trips per year between Cooktown and the Palmer.

It seems probable, therefore, that the carrying trade between Cooktown and the Palmer in the peak years 1875 to 1878 was divided something along the lines shown at Table 4.11 below, with Chinese carriers increasingly involved from 1876 onwards. The calculations of note are that each dray team (of 12-16 bullocks) probably returned a gross annual profit of around £530, each wagon team (of 6-8 horses) around £265 and each individual pack-horse around £25.[69] The obvious conclusion, supported by anecdotal evidence from the time, is that there was generally more to be made from the carrying trade than there was from prospecting, particularly in the years 1875-76, although the capital investment required and stock losses through disease and attacks by Aborigines would probably have reduced gross turnovers by at least 50 per cent.[70]

Table 4.11 - The Calculation of Earnings by Carriers Operating between Cooktown and the Palmer River Goldfields 1875-78

Serial/Notes	Item	1875	1876	1877	1878
(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)
1	Resupply requirements (tons)	1724	2763	3772	3606
2	Total paid (£)	108,000	126,000	138,000	125,000
3	**Amount per ton (£)**	**62.6**	**45.6**	**36.6**	**34.7**
4	**Porters available (no.)**	6524	5679	6364	88
5	Estimated porterage (tons)	349	304	340	4.7
6	Estimated total value (£)	21847	13862	12444	163
7	**Value per man (£)**	3.3	2.4	2.0	1.9
8	**Dray teams**	100	130	140	150
9	Potential capacity (tons) p.a.	4000	5200	5600	6000
10	Estimated carriage (tons) p.a.	890	1630	2044	1942
11	Estimated total value (£) p.a.	55714	74372	74832	67377
12	**Value per team p.a. (£)**	**557**	**572**	**535**	**449**
13	**Wagon teams** available (no.)	60	80	115	150
14	Potential capacity (tons) p.a.	1200	1600	2300	3000
15	Estimated carriage (tons) p.a.	266	502	840	970
16	Estimated total value (£) p.a.	16659	22884	30735	33688
17	**Value per team p.a. (£)**	**278**	**286**	**267**	**225**
18	**Pack horses** available (no.)	500	570	750	920
19	Potential capacity (tons) p.a.	1000	1040	1500	1840
20	Estimated carriage (tons) p.a.	222	326	548	595
21	Estimated total value (£) p.a.	13883	14874	20044	20662
22	**Value per horse p.a. (£)**	**28**	**26**	**27**	**22**

69 Carriers could well have made considerably more than these figures, given the requirement also for building materials etc to be transported to the Palmer. An estimate in one of the local newspapers, for example, put the potential profit *per trip* at £424 (which seems grossly exaggerated): *The Cooktown Courier,* 11 July 1874, p. 2.

70 In April 1874, bullocks were selling in Cooktown for £25 (ie £300 for a team of twelve) and team/pack-horses for £12 (ie £72 for a team of six): *Brisbane Courier,* 22 April 1874, p. 3. See also the cost estimate of £100 for a single wagon with harnesses: *The Cooktown Courier,* 11 July 1874, p. 2.

Notes and Sources:

1. Calculated by multiplying the average number of miners at the Palmer River goldfields by 2 lb per day.

2. Figures taken from Figure 4.10.

3. Calculated by dividing serial 2 by serial 1. Note also that these figures accord reasonably with contemporary accounts.

4. Derived from an assumption that 90% of Chinese immigrants to Cooktown were en route to the Palmer.

5. Calculated by multiplying number of porters available by 120 pounds.

6. Calculated by multiplying serial 3 by serial 5.

7. Calculated by dividing serial 6 by serial 4.

8. Calculated by extrapolation from the report of 2784 bullocks in the district in 1878: *The Cooktown Courier,* 19 January 1878, p. 3. Based on teams of 12-16 bullocks and an availability on the Cooktown-Palmer route of 75% of all teams in the district.

9. Based on the assumption of ten trips Cooktown-Palmer each year at 4 tons per dray: see W.H. Corfield, 'Reminiscences of North Queensland 1862-78' in *Journal of the Historical Society of Queensland,* 2, 2, June 1923, p. 93.

10. Calculated by apportioning the resupply requirements at serial 1 between the four modes on the basis of *pro rata* potential.

11. Calculated by multiplying serial 10 by serial 3.

12. Calculated by dividing serial 11 by serial 8.

13. Calculated by extrapolation from the report of 1100 team horses in the district in 1878: *The Cooktown Courier,* 19 January 1878, p. 3. Based on teams of 6-8 horses and an availability on the Cooktown-Palmer route of 75% of all teams in the district.

14. Based on the assumption of ten trips Cooktown-Palmer each year at 2 tons per wagon: see the estimate of each round trip taking six weeks in *The Cooktown Courier,* 11 July 1874, p. 2.

15. As for note 10.

16. Calculated by multiplying serial 15 by serial 3.

17. Calculated by dividing serial 16 by serial 13.

18. Calculated by extrapolation from the report of 1230 pack-horses in the district in 1878: *The Cooktown Courier,* 19 January 1878, p. 3. Based on an availability on the Cooktown-Palmer route of 75% of all pack-horses in the district.

19. Based on the assumption of ten trips Cooktown-Palmer each year at 2 cwt per animal.

20. As for note 10.

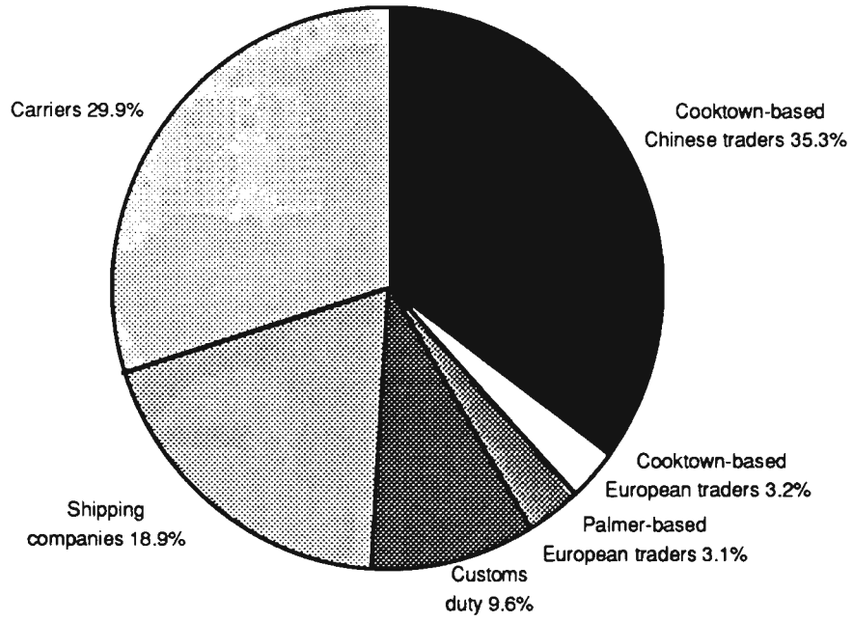
21. Calculated by multiplying serial 20 by serial 3.

22. Calculated by dividing serial 21 by serial 18.

The Nexus between Cooktown and the Palmer

What emerges from the preceding discussion is that miners on the Palmer River goldfields generated a substantial amount of business, peaking in 1877 at some £462,000 for supplies, cartages, shipping and customs duty.[71] A large proportion of the annual turnover, however, went either to Chinese merchants in Cooktown (35 per cent of it in 1877) or to European and Chinese carriers (30 per cent) (see Figure 4.11 below). The major European traders in Cooktown in 1877 probably received only around 3 per cent of the annual turnover (valued at around £14,800), while the smaller European merchants and storekeepers in Cooktown were by then largely confined to trade within the town and meeting the 'entertainment' and resupply needs of visiting transients (whose numbers it will be recalled from Figure 4.3 (at page 152) were around 100 per day).

Figure 4.11 - The Estimated Apportionment of Business Generated by the Miners on the Palmer River Goldfields in 1877



Source: Calculated by multiplying figures from Tables 4.7 and 4.8 at pages 162 and 163 respectively by average number of miners on the Palmer goldfields.

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71 Calculated by multiplying figures from Tables 4.7 and 4.8 at pages 162 and 163 respectively by average number of miners on the Palmer goldfields.

As discussed earlier, though, Cooktown's early 'white' business community had been established in the formative years of 1874 and 1875 on the basis of meeting the service needs of a large number of temporarily-accommodated residents, a daily transient population of around 100 adult white males *and* being involved in meeting the resupply requirements of a predominantly-white group of miners at the Palmer. As Cooktown's residents made the transition to permanent accommodation, as the transient population became increasingly dominated by the Chinese and as the white business community's share of the Palmer trade fell from 14.5 per cent in 1875 (valued at around £46,400) to 8.3 per cent (£33,000) in 1876 and then to 3.2 per cent (£14,800) in 1877, many white businesses went to the wall.[72]

It is unsurprising, therefore, that the euphoria of the white business community in 1874, wherein 'Cooktown has never enjoyed such prosperity as at present',[73] progressively waned over the succeeding three or so years until even the usually optimistic *Cooktown Courier* admitted in an editorial of early 1878 that 'the times are dull, and above all, unprofitable in this district ... no-one will venture to deny'.[74] Similarly, while correspondents in early 1874 were extolling the variety and number of small businesses in the town, as listed at Table 4.12 (over), more astute commentators were noting by late 1874 that 'the market is rapidly becoming overstocked and ... already there are more stores than the business of the town warrants'.[75] Indeed, in the years after about late 1877 the history of Cooktown's commercial development is one of continuing decline (the social and occupational mobility issues of which are addressed in detail in Chapter 5 'A Frontier Community').

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72 Figures calculated for 1875 and 1876 as for Figure 4.11. Cooktown's role as a service centre for the Hodgkinson goldfields, particularly in the peak years 1876-78 and in competition with other northern coastal ports, is important here in the context of attempting to stimulate business confidence in Cooktown and, in part, to offset the downturn in business with the Palmer.

73 Report by one of Cooktown's prominent merchants F.J.W. Beardmore in *CHPRA,* 7 November 1874, p. 2.

74 *The Cooktown Courier,* 13 March 1878, p. 3.

75 See *CHPRA,* 7 November 1874, p. 2.

Table 4.12 - Cooktown's Small Business Community in 1874

20 restaurants/dining rooms	5 auctioneers
12 large stores	4 tent/sail-makers
20 smaller stores	4 chemists
7 bootmakers	3 banks
7 blacksmiths	3 doctors
6 butchers	3 watchmakers
6 hairdressers	3 booksellers
5 saddlers	3 tinsmiths
5 bakers	2 newspapers

Source: *The Brisbane Courier,* 27 April 1874, p. 3.

Residential Development

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the initial land sale of May 1874 saw 135 town allotments auctioned off in some spirited bidding. The second land sale of September 1874 was similarly well patronised with 115 of 116 allotments on offer purchased for some two and a half times the upset value.[76] By the end of 1874, therefore, 250 town allotments had been sold by public auction in a block extending two streets back from Charlotte Street and five streets south from the government reserve at the foot of Grassy Hill (see Map 4.3 over).

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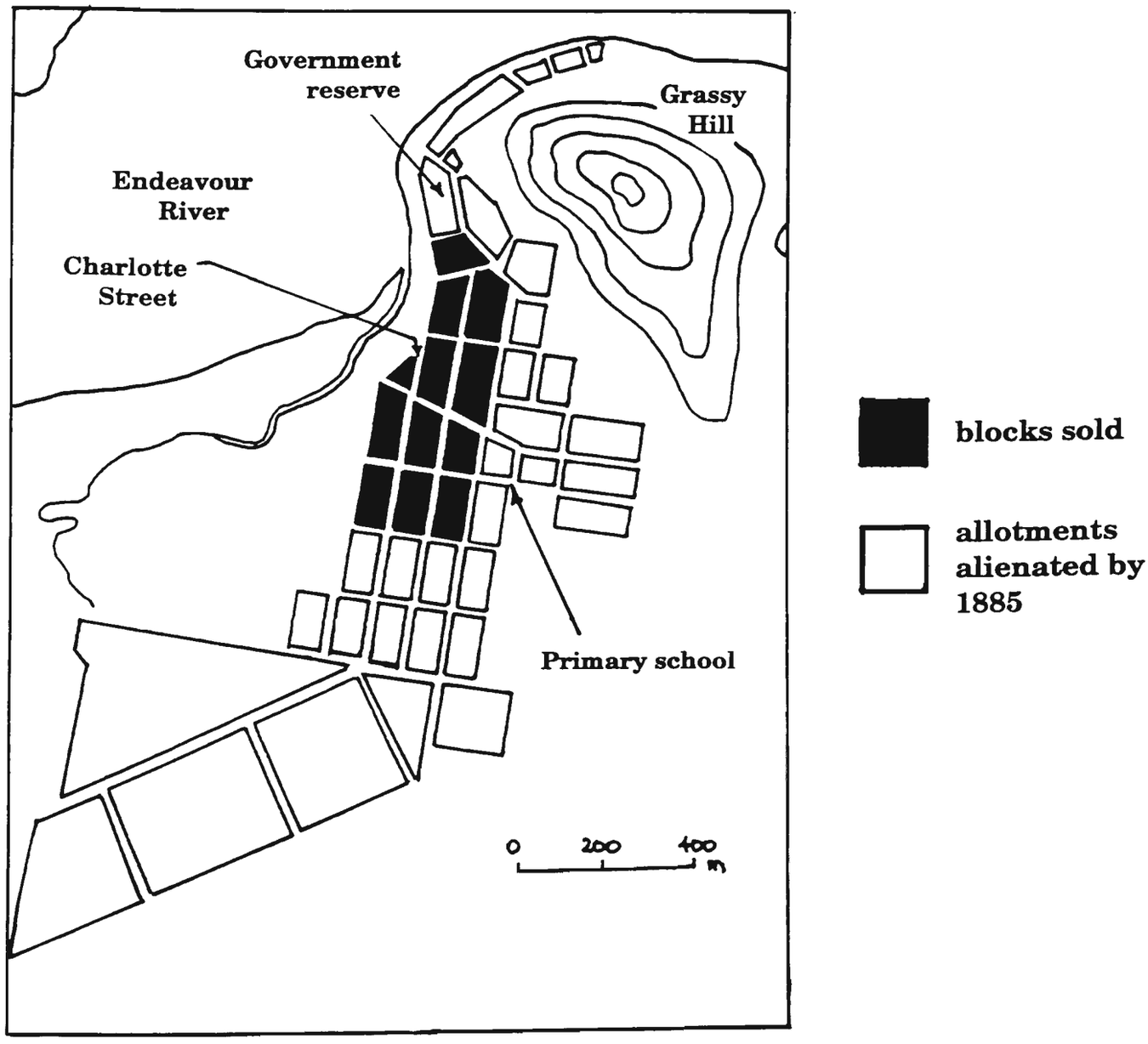
76 The slightly higher average of May 1874 was because the early allotments were the prime commercial sites and most already had improvements upon them.

Map 4.3 - Land Sales in Cooktown as at December 1874



Source: *Registers of the Sale of Crown Land by Public Auction* at Cooktown on 19 May and 24 September 1874, LAN/AB27, QSA.

In the years thereafter, however, sales slumped and it took another five years to sell the next 250 allotments.[77] While it was, of course, reasonable to expect that the prime commercial and residential sites would be purchased

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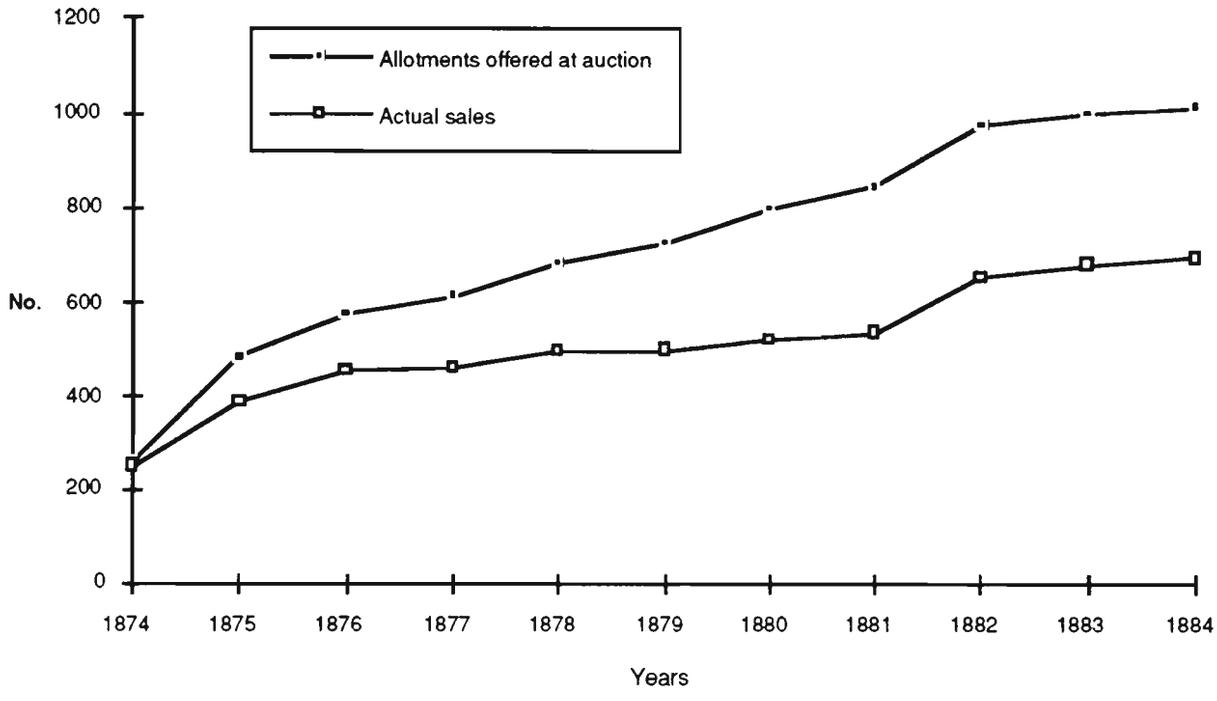
77 Some of the early commercial sites, however, continued to change hands for almost exorbitant prices. One, for example, was sold in late 1874 for £375: See *CHPRA* 9 December 1874, p. 2.

in the first year, Figure 4.12 below shows the progressively widening gap between the number of town allotments offered at public auction and actual sales.[78]

Figure 4.12 - Cumulative Gap between the Number of Town Building Allotments offered at Public Auction and Actual Sales Cooktown 1874-84

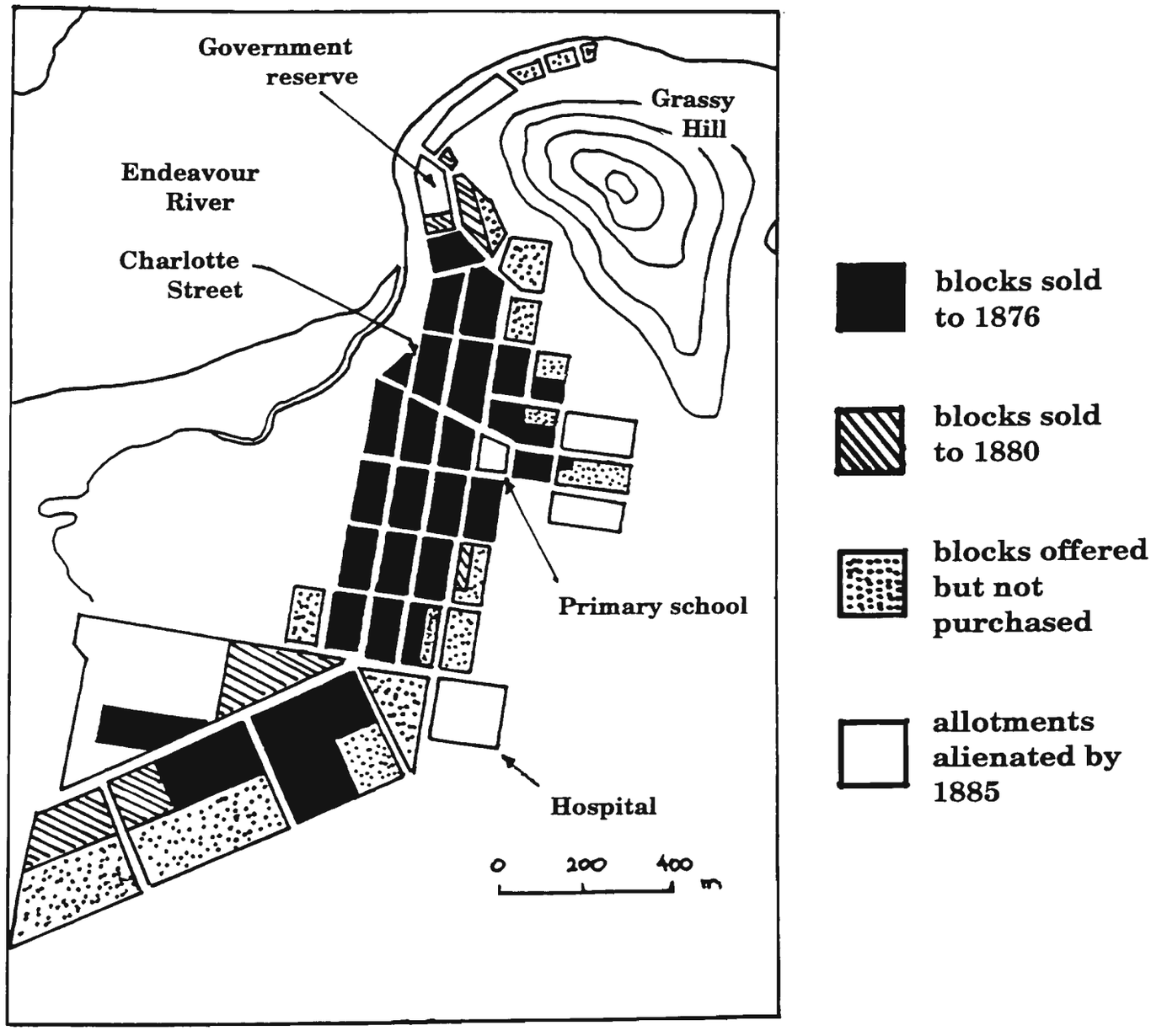


Source: Compiled from *Registers of the Sale of Cown Land by Public Auction for Cooktown*, 1874-84, LAN/AB series, QSA.

By the end of 1880, the main residential area had extended further south another two streets and eastwards one street, with some movement into the larger 'suburban' blocks astride the road leading towards the Palmer. As can be seen from Map 4.4 (over), however, most of that expansion had occurred by 1876, with the noticeable trend by 1880 being the increasing number of available but unpurchased allotments.

78 Some of the allotments offered at auction were passed in several times, resulting in some inflation of the 'allotments offered' trend line.

Map 4.4 - Land Sales in Cooktown as at December 1880



Source: Map 4.3 on page 177 and *Registers of the Sale of Crown Land by Public Auction* at Cooktown 1875-80, LAN/AB 28, 29, 31, 33, 34 and 35 of 1875-80, QSA.

The other significant trend was the difference between upset and realised values for the land offered at public auction over the period 1874-84. While it was to be expected that the prime commercial and residential sites (most with an upset value of £50 per acre) would attract high bids at the sales in 1874, Figure 4.13 (over) shows that realised values from 1876 onwards barely exceeded upset prices which by then had fallen to £12/10 per acre.[79]

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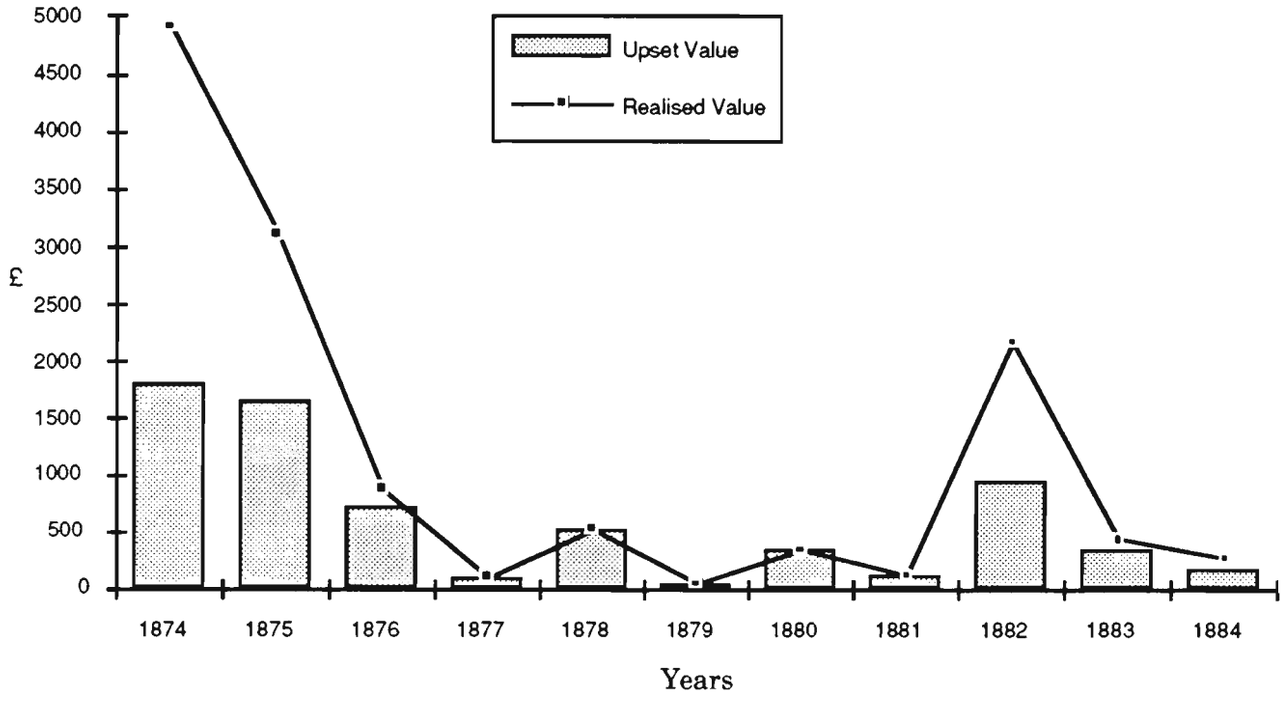
79 The exception was 1882 where the release of prime residential sites along the waterfront on the north-west slopes of Grassy Hill briefly revived realised values.

Figure 4.13 - The Difference between Upset and Realized Values for Town Building Allotments offered at Public Auction Cooktown 1874-84

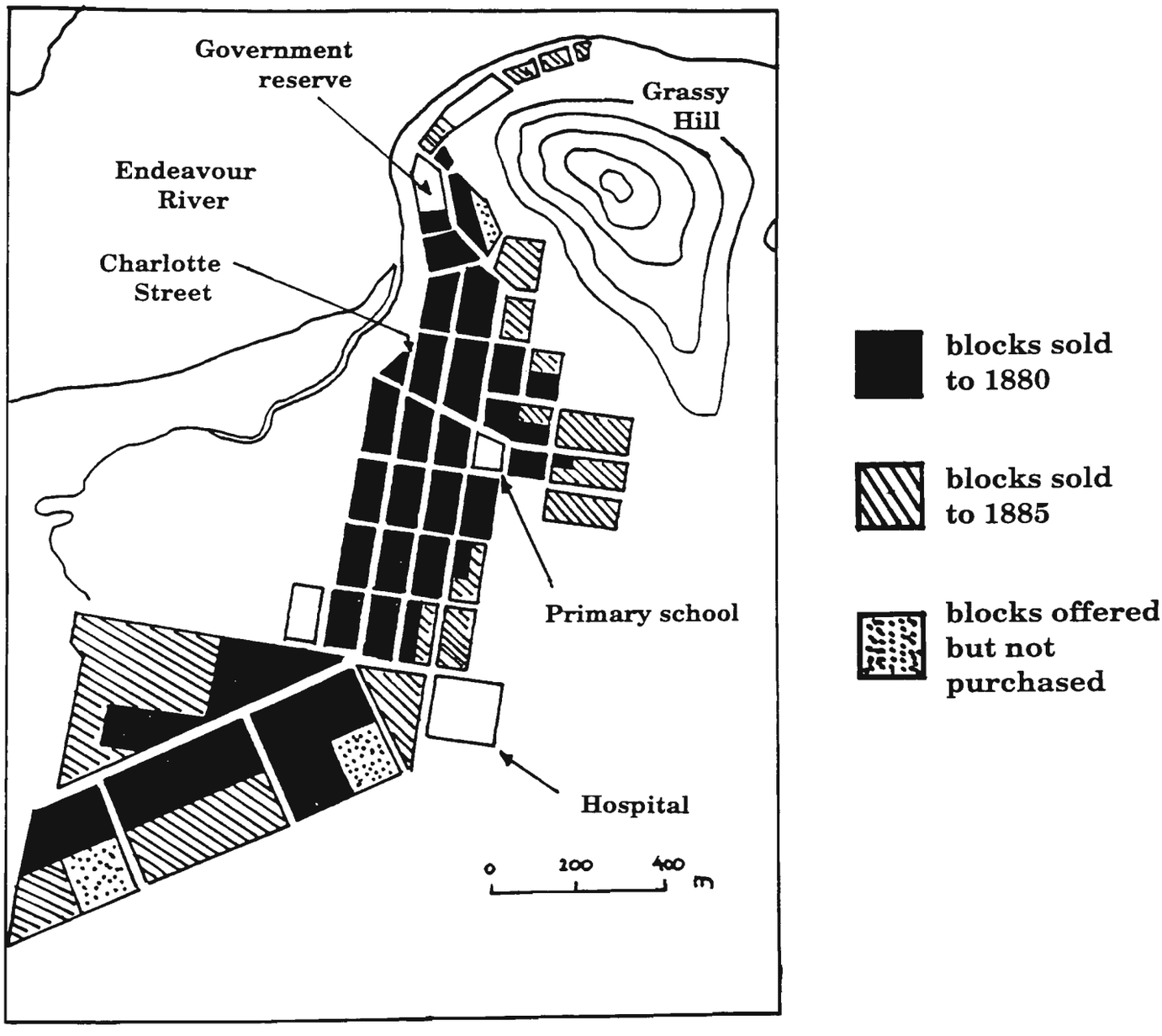


Source: Compiled from *Registers of the Sale of Crown Land by Public Auction for Cooktown*, 1874-84, LAN/AB series, QSA.

By the end of 1884, therefore, land sales in Cooktown had largely reached the point of satisfying foreseeable demand, with the 'town' allotments occupying an area five streets wide by seven streets long, and with 'suburban' blocks spreading astride the road to the Palmer (see Map 4.5 over).[80]

80 No land sales were conducted in 1885. In later years, further 'suburban' blocks were offered extending east from the area of the primary school towards the ocean and south from the area of the hospital.

Map 4.5 - Land Sales in Cooktown as at December 1884

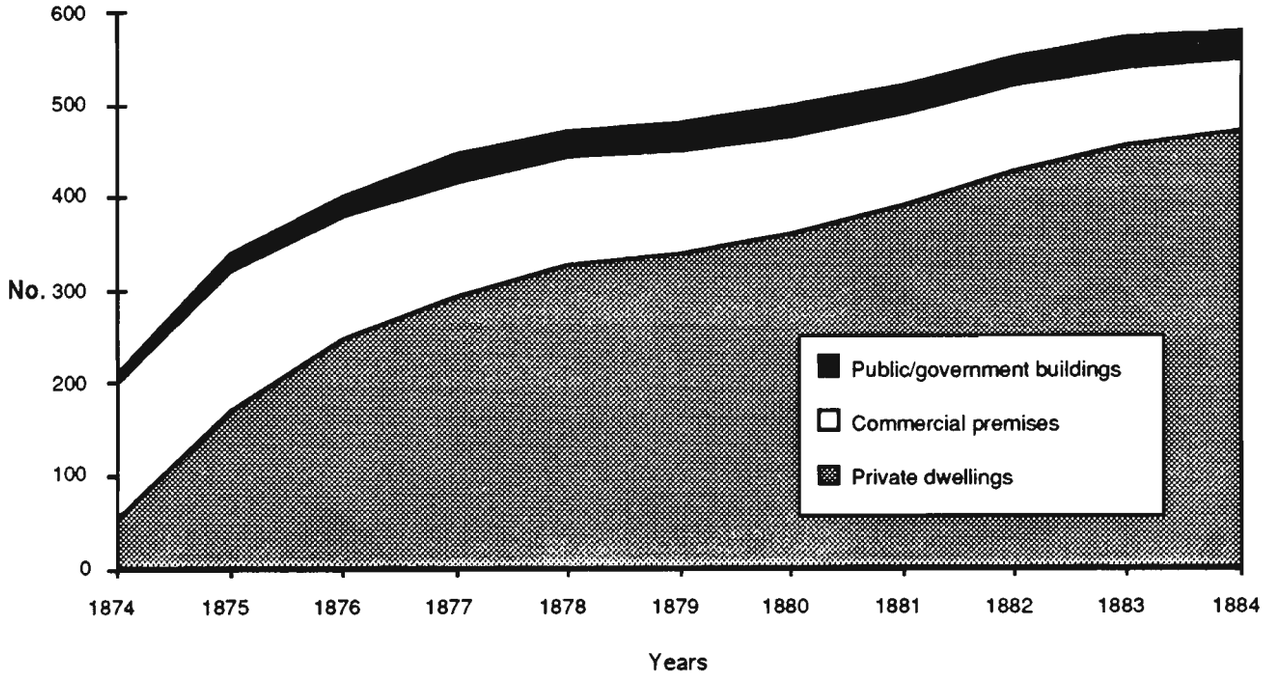


Source: Maps 4.3 and 4.4 (at pages 177 and 179 respectively) and *Registers of the Sale of Crown Land by Public Auction* at Cooktown 1881-85, LAN/AB 37, 39, 41, 43 and 45 of 1881-85, QSA.

More difficult to quantify is how many of the 755 town and suburban allotments sold by 1884 actually had buildings or dwellings constructed upon them. The census of 1881 and official statistics for 1885 put the number of buildings at 665 and 630 respectively, although it is not clear how many of those were public buildings erected on government reserves as opposed to

buildings on alienated allotments.[81] Similarly, contemporary accounts across the period 1879-85 often mentioned around 660 buildings in the town but with no differentiation between public buildings, commercial premises, private dwellings or the fabrications of fringe dwellers.[82] On balance, it seems reasonable to assume that the number and composition of *permanent* buildings was something along the lines shown at Figure 4.14 below.

Figure 4.14 - An Estimate of Permanent Buildings in Cooktown 1874-84



Source: Assumes construction on 80% of all building allotments sold to 1881 and 70% thereafter. Figures for commercial premises and public/government buildings taken from various reports in *The Cooktown Courier* and *CHPRA*, 1874-85.

The Fringe Dwellers

In addition to the permanent buildings within the town proper, Cooktown also had a floating population living temporarily or semi-permanently on its fringes. In the early years, it consisted on those 'residents' unable to afford or secure permanent accommodation within the town, as well as would-be white miners either waiting to move to the Palmer or waiting to ship southwards having failed at the goldfields. As discussed earlier in this

81 See *QVP*, 1, 1881, p. 1112 and 2, 1886, p. 481.

82 A visiting Water Supply Department official in a letter to the Colonial Treasurer of December 1884 put the number of dwellings (presumably he meant residential) at 400: see letter Hydraulic Engineer to Colonial Treasurer of 4 December 1884, in-letter 4093/84 of 1884, TRE/A29, QSA.

chapter, the number of would-be residents probably numbered at its peak about 1100, while the number of would-be or had-been miners was at one time as high as 2200 (see Figure 4.1 at page 142).

No details seem to have survived of the accommodation conditions of the would-be white residents but most probably lived in shanties or tents abutting the more permanent parts of the town. As the town grew, many probably made the transition to permanent accommodation, either to a boarding house or a residential dwelling. Most of the would-be miners, though, seem to have camped astride the road leading south of Cooktown towards the Palmer.[83]

Similarly, newly-arrived Chinese bound for the Palmer were taken by their 'minders' to camping grounds south of the town, to be equipped and loaded up for the trip to the goldfields.[84] From mid 1875 onwards, however, more and more Chinese settled in Cooktown itself, with their numbers by late 1876 supposedly totalling half the population.[85] By early 1877, it was claimed — exaggeratedly — that 'there are 3000 Chinese about the town'.[86] What is somewhat unclear, though, is where the Chinese population resided, given that only nine town or suburban allotments were sold to Chinese buyers at land sales between 1875 and 1879.

A number of the Chinese 'residents' were market gardeners, working on small plots south of the town. Their first-recorded presence was in April 1874, with a correspondent noting that 'the Chinamen have commenced a garden and today we have Cooktown-grown lettuce on the table'.[87] Two years later, their numbers seem to have increased significantly, with an editorial in *The Cooktown Courier* complaining that the town's water supply 'is so befouled by Chinese gardeners that it is often not fit to drink'.[88] Indeed, by late 1878 Chinese market gardeners, wood cutters and water carriers so dominated those industries that editorial comment, again in *The Cooktown*

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83 See, for example, the report of '500 men camped within a few miles of town waiting for the rivers to go down' in *The Brisbane Courier,* 16 February 1874, p. 3.

84 See *CHPRA,* 8 May 1875, p. 2 noting that 'they pass through the town ... in very short time'.

85 *The Cooktown Courier,* 21 October 1876, p. 2.

86 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 10 February 1877, p. 2.

87 See *The Brisbane Courier,* 22 April 1874, p. 3.

88 *The Cooktown Courier,* 15 November 1876, p. 2. The issue of town water is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Courier, bemoaned the situation whereby 'they are almost in a position to dictate ... what we shall pay for the bare necessaries of life'.[89]

The remainder of the Chinese community, possibly numbering between 500 and 1000 people, most likely lived in 'Chinatown', the term loosely applied by white residents to the collection of stores and shanties in 'the Chinese section' of Charlotte Street. Holthouse in *River of gold* gives a very exotic account of the 'town within a town ... which might have been Canton or Hong Kong'.[90] The local newspapers, by contrast preferred such descriptions as 'the evil-smelling ... back slum, with which the town is cursed ... [and] which nightly draws boys, raw youths and foolish men into that haunt of foetid vice'.[91] While both descriptions are certainly colourful, neither is particularly useful in terms of understanding the role played by fringe dwellers in Cooktown's early development, an issue discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Housing Styles

Very little was likewise written about the housing styles or architecture in general of Cooktown's early years. Fragmentary evidence lends support to a number of the conclusions of Ray Sumner in her article on 'Pioneer homesteads of North Queensland'.[92] In particular, many of the dwellings erected in Cooktown in the early 1870s seemed to conform to Sumner's 'distinctive Australian house-form: the timber framed, weatherboard, verandahed house with an iron roof' and with her observation that most 'houses were raised some 20 cm above the ground on wooden piles [stumps]'.[93]

Indeed, on both those counts, the Cooktown experience seems to run contrary to Bell's assertions (perhaps made more in relation to mining settlements) that 'the nature of housing in the region was determined by the origins of the immigrant population' and that 'adaption to the physical environment was a secondary concern, expressed more often in subsequent

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89 *The Cooktown Courier,* 4 September 1878, p. 2.
90 Holthouse, *River of gold,* pp. 144-5.
91 *The Cooktown Courier,* 20 December 1876, p. 2.
92 See R. Sumner, 'Pioneer homesteads of North Queensland' in *Lectures on North Queensland history,* 1st series, James Cook University, Townsville, 1974, pp. 47-62.
93 Sumner, 'Pioneer homesteads ...', pp. 55 and 57.

modification of buildings than in original construction'.[94] Certainly, any number of Cooktown's early buildings — the school-house and the customs house of 1874, for example — all had wide verandahs all round, with particular further emphasis in their construction on being 'well ventilated'.[95]

That aside, it is evident that four additional observations can be made about Cooktown's early housing. The first is that a number of government buildings, in particular, were prefabricated in Brisbane. The early customs house, bond stores and post office, for example, arrived in Cooktown in late April 1874 in prefabricated sections, for assembly by contractors sent from Brisbane.[96] Moreover, several such 'prefabs' were quite substantial buildings. The bond store, for example, measured 60 feet x 30 feet and required considerable excavation 'to receive the immense foundation stones for the structure which is being put together'.[97]

The second observation, perhaps a subset of the first, is that many of the early commercial buildings in Cooktown were constructed in such a way that they could be easily dis-assembled (and moved, for example, from Cooktown to the Palmer diggings) or moved bodily over short distances within Cooktown, once land tenure had been established. The Australian Joint Stock Bank in Cooktown, for example, was 'moved bodily to a new location' after the land sale of late May 1874, as was the Gympie Hotel in July 1874.[98]

The third observation is that many of the early buildings in Cooktown were flimsily constructed, with little regard (undoubtedly through ignorance) to the prevailing climatic conditions. A strong gale in July 1876 demolished the verandahs of the Temperance Hall and Diggers Arms hotel, 'carried away the roof of the hospital ... [and] completely removed Mr Henriques' office from its stumps'.[99] Two weeks later, a similarly severe gale blew the school building 'out of perpendicular by twenty-two inches'.[100]

The final observation is that buildings were frequently sited with scant regard for adjacent buildings in the event of a fire. In the aftermath of

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94 See P. Bell, 'Houses and Mining Settlement in North Queensland 1861-1920', PhD thesis, James Cook University, Townsville, 1982, p. iii.

95 See *CHPRA,* 17 June 1874, p. 3 and 9 September 1874, p. 2.

96 See *CHPRA,* 29 April 1874, p. 3.

97 See *CHPRA,* 29 April 1874, p. 2 and *The Cooktown Courier,* 23 May 1874, p. 3.

98 As reported in *The Cooktown Courier,* 4 July 1874, p. 2 and 18 July 1874, p. 3.

99 *The Cooktown Courier,* 21 June 1876, p. 2.

100 *The Cooktown Courier,* 5 July 1876, p. 2.

the town's first major fire in August 1875, an editorial in *The Cooktown Herald and Palmer River Advertiser* noted that 'had the fire gained hold ... no exertion could have saved the whole town'.[101] Although the lesson was not heeded, European 'volunteers' pre-emptively demolished a number of shanties and outbuildings in Chinatown to halt the spread of Cooktown's second major fire in October 1875.[102] In the event, the second fire at least prompted the eventual formation of a volunteer fire brigade.

Government Buildings

As indicated earlier in this chapter, an issue which drew surprisingly little agitation from Cooktown's early settlers was the paucity of government buildings and services. One explanation is that the early residents were 'hell-bent' on exploiting the commercial opportunities presented by the rush to the Palmer and either gave little thought to the longer-term prospects of the settlement, or preferred anyway a *laissez-faire* approach not only to business but also to their everyday lifestyle. Another explanation, not exclusive of the first, is that Cooktown's early residents well recognised the tenuous *raison d'être* of the town and wanted to give the authorities in Brisbane no additional excuse, by complaining of the lack of government infrastructure, to question further the longer-term prospects of the infant settlement.

For its part, the Queensland Government was certainly in no hurry to provide government infrastructure or services, beyond the minimum presence needed to collect customs revenues and duties, and to provide a modicum of law and order.[103] In the period to 30 June 1875, for example, some twenty months after the town's establishment, almost 80 per cent of government-funded public works expenditure on buildings related to the provision of customs services and harbour facilities.[104] Indeed, in the period to 30 June 1884 (over a decade after the town's establishment), the customs' and harbours' share of public works building expenditure still exceeded 50 per cent of the cumulative total.[105]

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101 *CHPRA*, 11 August 1875, p. 2.

102 *CHPRA*, 16 October 1875, p. 2.

103 The relationship between the authorities in Brisbane and the early settlement of Cooktown is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6 'Small Town in a Large Colony'.

104 Expenditure on 'customs' and 'harbours' was some £4816 in a total of around £6107: see *QVP*, 1, 1875, pp. 849, 855, 875 and 900-2.

105 Expenditure on 'customs' and 'harbours' was some £20,697 in a total of around £39,953: see Table 6.1 'Expenditure on Public Works in Cooktown by Queensland Government, 1873-86' in Chapter 6.

That apportionment met with little opposition from the town's early traders and merchants, especially as it related to wharf improvements and the provision of bonded stores (for incoming cargo liable for customs duty). Indeed, practically the only criticism of the Government in the first year or so of settlement related to one or the other of those two issues. The visiting Commissioner of Police, for example, noted in February 1874 that 'the wharfage is in very bad state ... [and] nothing has been done to improve it beyond the partial clearing of mangroves by private persons here and there'.[106] In early March 1874, one of the town's prominent merchants, frustrated at the lack of action by the government, built his own wharf described by the local newspaper as 'thoroughly substantial in character and calculated to last for years'.[107]

Unrelated to that initiative but in response to ongoing pressure, the authorities in Brisbane despatched a prefabricated customs house and bonded store, together with a team of contractors to assemble the buildings on site.[108] They were erected on the government reserve at the northern end of Charlotte Street (see Map 4.6 over), with both buildings described by visitors as substantial and commodious, albeit that the bonded store was also 'plain, solid and unpretentious'.[109]

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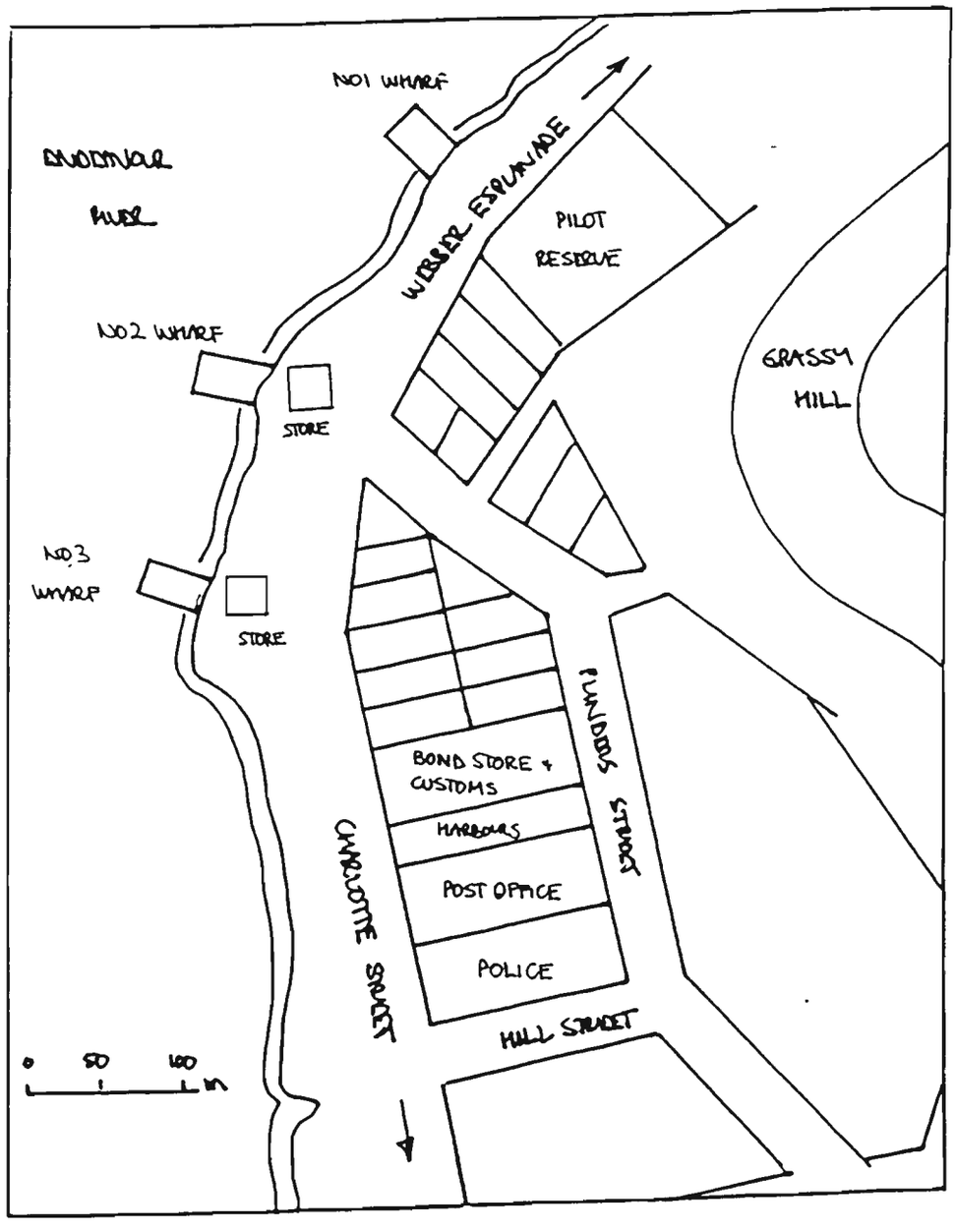
106 See letter Commissioner Seymour to Colonial Secretary of 24 February 1874, in-letter 399/74 of 1874, COL/A192, QSA.

107 See *CHPRA,* 25 March 1874, p. 2.

108 The urgency of their despatch is perhaps evident by the fact that the buildings arrived in Cooktown on 22 April 1874 (see *CHPRA,* 22 April 1874, p. 3) although the closing date of the tender for their supply was 20 April 1874: see *QGG,* Vol. 15, 1874, p. 377.

109 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 23 May 1874, p. 3. The customs house was 76 feet x 32 feet, with a wide verandah all round, while the bonded store was 60 feet x 30 feet. Their combined value was £3030: see *QVP,* 1, 1875, p. 875.

Map 4.6 - The Location of Early Government Buildings in Cooktown 1874-75



Source: Locations primarily derived from descriptions in *The Cooktown Courier* and *The Cooktown Herald and CHPRA*, 1874-75.

Shortly thereafter, the authorities in Brisbane also agreed to the construction of three wharves, to be sited adjacent to the government reserve at the northern end of Charlotte Street. Work on them began in late June 1874, with the arrival of a pile-driving machine from Cardwell.[110] Interestingly, timber for the wharves — including swamp mahogany piles — was transported from Brisbane 'in consequence of the scarcity of suitable

110 See *CHPRA*, 1 July 1874, p. 2. No expenditure for wharfage, however appears in the relevant public works allocations or estimates for either 1873/74 or 1874/75.

timber on the spot'.[111] Once completed, the wharves were leased by tender, on an annual basis with No. 1 wharf going initially to ASN & Co. (The Australasian Steam Navigation Company of Sydney) for an undisclosed but 'exorbitant rate'.[112] Numbers 2 and 3 were leased to local agents for £450 and £280 respectively.[113]

Other major expenditure on customs and harbours in the period to 1885 is shown at Table 4.13 (below). Of particular note, given the downturn in Cooktown's economy from about 1877, is the substantial expenditure in the years between 1881 and 1884 (see serials 6, 8 and 11).

Table 4.13 - Public Works Expenditure on Customs and Harbours in Cooktown 1874-85

Serial	Year	Cost (£)	Item
(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)
1	1873/74	586	Pilot and boatmen's houses
2	1874/75	650	Residence for sub-collector of customs
3	1875/76	414	Wharf improvements
4	1876/77	874	Pilot vessel
5	1877/78	561	Additions to bond store
6	1881/82	2664	Extension of wharves and sheds
7	1881/82	335	Cottage for coxswain
8	1883/84	3421	Lighthouses (Walkers Point and Stony Island)
9	1883/84	258	Harbour office
10	1883/84	700	Cottages for boatmen
11	1884/85	2673	Wharf extension
12	1884/85	1334	Dredging of harbour

Source: Public works estimates and expenditure tables in *QVP*, 1874-85.

The second significant grouping of government buildings included the police, court-house and post office. Although the three were eventually funded into separate buildings by their respective departments, they started life in Cooktown sharing the same two small iron and wooden buildings described earlier in this chapter. At that time (February 1874), the police detachment comprised nine men, with the bulk of the force in the district

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111 See report in *CHPRA*, 17 June 1874, p. 3. At the same time, 34 iron-screw pile beacons were positioned on outlying reefs to mark the route seawards.

112 *CHPRA*, 10 November 1875, p. 2 in relation to 1874 tender process.

113 *The Cooktown Courier*, 20 October 1875, p. 2. Note, however, that *CHPRA*, 21 October 1874, p. 2 stated that No. 2 wharf was leased for £185.

(another 66 men) deployed to the Palmer.[114] Although no details seem to have been recorded of the expenditure involved, it seems likely that the Cooktown detachment under Sub-Inspector Douglas moved to a temporary station in the government reserve at the northern end of Charlotte Street sometime in mid 1874. In 1878/79, a new police station, barracks and cells were built on the same site, costed at £1327.[115]

Similarly, the post office moved from its shared accommodation to a new site next to the police station in Charlotte Street in July 1874.[116] That move somewhat alleviated the problems of the long-suffering postmaster, who had previously attempted to manage the postal needs of around 1500 residents from a 'pigeon-hole', leading one of the local newspapers to describe the postal service as 'one of the worst managed of all the local government offices'.[117] With the connection of Cooktown to the overland telegraph service in 1876, a new combined post and telegraph office was funded in the public works estimates of 1876/77 to the value of £2495.[118] The building was described as 'nice looking and commodious ... with both the public offices and private apartments being spacious and lofty [while] the roof is admirably arranged to allow the free circulation of air'.[119]

The court house seems to have stayed in its original accommodation, once vacated by the police and post office, until mid 1875. It then moved to a newly-constructed building, described as of 'an imposing nature on one of the most eligible sites in town', on the government reserve at the foot of Grassy Hill.[120] A local newspaper report noted that its construction included 150,000 feet of timber.[121]

The two other important government-funded buildings were the hospital and primary school. Both had an extremely checkered early history, brought about in large part by the fact that the Government made the funding of their construction (and maintenance in the case of the hospital) contingent

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114 From about August 1874, it seems that a detachment of native troopers was also stationed at Eight Mile (from Cooktown) to keep the Palmer road 'clear of blacks': see *The Cooktown Courier,* 15 August 1874, p. 3.

115 See *QVP,* 1, 1880, pp. 939 and 1387.

116 See *CHPRA,* 15 July 1874, p. 2. The new building cost £303: *QVP,* 2, 1874, p. 42.

117 See *CHPRA,* 29 April 1874, p. 2.

118 *QVP,* 1, 1878, p. 615 and 1, 1879, p. 89.

119 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 20 December 1876, p. 2 although the same report noted that 'the rooms are closely ceiled, with no gratings to allow the escape of hot air'.

120 See *CHPRA,* 28 April 1875, p. 2. The building cost £859: *QVP,* 2, 1877, p. 272.

121 *CHPRA,* 12 May 1875, p. 2.

upon matching subscriptions from the local community. The hospital, as will be discussed in Chapter 5 'A Frontier Community', also suffered seriously in its early years from a procession of resident doctors, allegations of mismanagement and rifts with the Chinese business community over the funding of Chinese patients.

That said, the hospital at least had the advantage over the school of wide community support for its construction. Indeed, the first fifteen-bed hospital was constructed on the corner of Green and Helen Streets within the space of about two weeks in late April 1874, solely on the basis of private subscriptions to the value of £265.[122] Subsequent advice from the Government was that it would match private subscriptions towards building costs to the value of £300, as well as providing £600 per year towards maintenance costs, on the proviso that the local community matched half the latter amount.[123]

Over the following three or so years, the hospital expanded to forty-seven beds, as its yearly admissions — with an increasing number of Chinese — rose from 141 in 1874 to 348 in 1878.[124] The large increase in Chinese patients from 1876 onwards prompted periodic calls from disgruntled white subscribers for a separate Chinese ward (funded by the Chinese business community) or, indeed, a separate Chinese hospital.[125] In the event, the Chinese issue was largely overtaken by the decision to build a new hospital on the southern edge of the town precincts, funded to the value of £1945 in the public works estimates of 1879/80.[126] In the years thereafter, the preoccupation of hospital administrators — like most other civic leaders in Cooktown — was in attempting to secure a 'fair share' of government funding, as the town slipped into decline.

The primary school, by contrast, had a more difficult birth but an easier infancy. Its initial canvass for subscriptions clashed with that of the hospital and less than £95 of a promised £125 was raised.[127] Sensing a general lack of interest by the community, the honorary secretary decided to

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122 See *CHPRA,* 20 April 1874, p. 3 and 6 May 1874, p. 3.

123 *CHPRA,* 22 April 1874, p. 3.

124 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 23 January 1879, p. 3.

125 At its monthly meeting in February 1876, the hospital committee resolved to provide a separate ward for Chinese: see *The Cooktown Courier,* 9 February 1876, p. 2. In the event, that did not eventuate because of difficulties in funding. A Chinese wardsman was, however, appointed in March 1877: *The Cooktown Courier,* 3 March 1877, p. 2.

126 *QVP,* 1, 1880, p. 1387.

127 *CHPRA,* 5 August 1874, p. 3.

let matters rest. The Board of Education in Brisbane, however, having been advised of the original proposal for a school, proceeded with its plans for the design of a 60 foot x 20 foot prefabricated building 'ready to be shipped to Cooktown as soon as possible'.[128] By August 1874, therefore, acrimonious recriminations were being bandied around the town and south to Brisbane, together with the occasional suggestion of embezzlement by the secretary.

After a heated public meeting in Cooktown in early August, the project was resurrected (albeit that the original subscription list had been mislaid) and plans put in place to get the then-completed school building shipped at the first opportunity, on the understanding that the government would match private subscriptions on the basis of £2 for every £1 raised.[129] By early September, a tender had been let to a local tradesman to erect the building for £180, with the work expected to be completed within two months.[130] After inspecting the plans and specifications, the editor of one of the local newspapers pronounced that the building should be 'exceedingly well adapted to the climate .... we now need only a talented master and mistress to occupy it'.[131]

As it turned out, a school-master was duly provided by the Board of Education and the school opened on 26 January 1875 with 80 pupils, consisting of 38 girls and 42 boys.[132] The downside was that the Education Department had neglected to provide 'books, registers, black boards or any other requisites for the conduct of a school'.[133] How long that equipment took to procure was not recorded. Over the following decade, the number of teachers at the school varied between four and eight, with the number of pupils ranging between 154 and 322.[134] Although the government provided £239 and £216 in 1878/79 and 1884/85 respectively for repairs to school buildings, an editorial in *The Cooktown Courier* of January 1877 noted that 'the ruinous condition of the primary school is ... a matter that deserves attention'.[135]

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128 See report in *The Cooktown Courier,* 25 July 1874, p. 3.

129 Proceedings of the meeting duly recorded in *CHPRA,* 5 August 1874, p. 3.

130 See *CHPRA,* 9 September 1874, p. 2.

131 *CHPRA,* 9 September 1874, p. 2.

132 *CHPRA,* 27 January 1875, p. 2.

133 *CHPRA,* 27 January 1875, p. 2.

134 Education matters are discussed in more detail in Chapter 5 'A Frontier Community'.

135 *The Cooktown Courier,* 13 January 1877, p. 2. Funding figures from *QVP,* 2, 1879, pp. 26-7 and 2, 1885, p. 686.

The remaining 'public' buildings in the town were either funded through the local council or by special-interest groups within the community.[136] The former included the school of arts, which opened in February 1876.[137] By the end of 1878, its public library was lending over 2000 books per year, 'notwithstanding that a number of inhabitants have left Cooktown over the past twelve months because of the depression in trade'.[138] Early calls for a mechanics institute resulted in the appointment of a committee to investigate the acquisition of suitable premises but little concrete action thereafter.[139]

The 'special-interest' buildings included the masonic lodge and a number of churches.[140] The foundation stone for the masonic hall was laid in July 1875.[141] Early meetings were well attended but, by 1878, the building had fallen into disuse and disrepair, with an estimate from the town council (in the context of buying the building for use as a town hall) that it would need £100 'just to prevent it falling down'.[142] The volunteer fire brigade, on the lookout for a suitable building in which to house its newly-acquired (horse-drawn) fire engine, similarly decided that it could not afford to buy the building, 'owing to the dullness of the times'.[143]

The first permanent church building in Cooktown was that of the Roman Catholics, which officially opened in May 1875. Subscriptions to its building fund raised over £200 within the space of a few days, 'with only half the town canvassed'.[144] Next was the Episcopalian Church of Christ in June 1875, a 'very commodious building valued at £300', closely followed in July by the Church of England.[145] The churches, like almost all other buildings in the

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136 Public facilities, such as the botanical gardens, racecourse and cricket ground are discussed in more detail in the context of 'entertainment' in Chapter 5 'A Frontier Community'.

137 See *QVP,* 2, 1879, p. 163.

138 As reported in the school's annual report for 1878: *The Cooktown Courier,* 11 January 1879, p. 2. By then, the school's maintenance was being subsidised by the Government on a £1 for £1 basis.

139 See *CHPRA,* 25 August 1875, p. 2 for a spirited argument for the need. Pending construction of a dedicated building, the Police Magistrate granted free use of a room in the newly-constructed court house: *The Cooktown Courier,* 4 August 1875, p. 3.

140 The role of such organisations within the Cooktown community is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5 'A Frontier Community'.

141 *CHPRA,* 21 July 1875, p. 2.

142 *The Cooktown Courier,* 5 October 1878, p. 2.

143 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 24 July 1878, p. 2 and 5 October 1878, p. 2.

144 *CHPRA,* 25 November 1874, p. 2.

145 See *CHPRA,* 19 May 1875, p. 2 and 16 July 1875, p. 2. The Church of England building was described as 40 feet x 24 feet, with walls 13 feet high, and the cost £300: *The Cooktown Courier,* 22 May 1875, p. 2.

town, were initially constructed of timber, with weatherboard-type outer walls and a corrugated-iron roof.

Public Works

The final and over-riding physical manifestation of Cooktown's early development was, of course, the public works aspect of its roads, kerbs and culverts, and some early moves towards the provision of a water supply and sewerage. Whereas the road from Cooktown to the Palmer was funded by the Queensland government, the provision of public works within Cooktown was largely the responsibility of the town council (once formed), albeit that assistance with funding for larger projects also came from Brisbane.[146]

The 'saga' of the early development of local government in Cooktown is a story in itself, as will be discussed later, complete with the resignation of mayors, the sacking of town clerks, accusations of embezzlement and malpractice, motions of no-confidence and the formation of an alternative 'progress committee' by disgruntled townspeople. It is perhaps suffice at this stage to say that the early conduct of municipal affairs made the problems of the hospital and primary school pale into insignificance, and confine discussion here to the physical extent and progress of Cooktown's early public works program.

In that regard, the early focus of public attention (and criticism) was on the state of Cooktown's roads, especially Charlotte Street. In the first year or so of Cooktown's existence, the main street was a narrow, uneven laneway, leading southwards from the government reserve and lined with a largely ramshackle collection of buildings, shanties and tents protruding irregularly onto the thoroughfare. In the dry season, the street was dusty and rutted; in the wet, it became a quagmire of churned-up mud, pot-holes and rivulets, frequently impassable to drays and wagons.[147] One of the side-streets, leading to the hospital, was particularly described by *The Cooktown Courier* as 'positively dangerous to life and limb [with] large ruts in the path and tree-stumps in the roadway'.[148]

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146 Public works funding and, indeed, the wider issue of the development of local government in Cooktown is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6 'Small Town in a Large Colony'.

147 See Holthouse, *River of Gold,* p. 54 describing 'the mud which was inches thick'.

148 *The Cooktown Courier,* 4 August 1875, p. 3.

In December 1874, with the grant of £1000 from the authorities in Brisbane, work began on surfacing the upper end of Charlotte Street and constructing a stone-lined culvert at the creek-crossing three blocks south of the government reserve.[149] At the same time, government-funded work parties grubbed out the remaining tree stumps from the main street 'which have hitherto been so unsightly and dangerous'.[150] A further grant of £1000 in August 1875 enabled work on the main street to be extended southwards and for some preliminary work to be done on several of the side streets.[151]

By early 1876, however, in the absence of further allocations, Cooktown's streets had quickly deteriorated, with the bottom end of Charlotte Street once again impassable to dray traffic because of 'large gullies caused by the surface flow of heavy rain'.[152] Several side streets were still in 'an extremely dangerous state ... with the small rivers and large creeks across Green Street [near the hospital] ... a matter of positive danger'.[153] Local newspaper editorials warned that 'unless maintained, even the metalled part [of Charlotte Street] will become unavailable for traffic'.[154]

In early 1877, the newly-formed municipal council secured a government loan of £5000 for Cooktown's roads and quickly set about surfacing the complete length of Charlotte Street and the key side streets, as well as constructing kerbs and channels with locally-quarried stone.[155] Interestingly, most of the stone-working work-force consisted of Chinese, as whites supposedly 'considered it derogatory work to do'.[156] Following complaints from white ratepayers, a council meeting in July 1877 resolved to stop employing Chinese labourers and to advertise in southern papers for European workers.[157] The outcome of the council's initiative is not recorded.

That issue aside, it seems likely that Cooktown by around 1878 had a metalled main street, with stone kerbs and channelling, and that a similar program for its secondary and cross streets was underway by the late 1870s. In the minds of some residents, that progress had no doubt come too slowly.

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149 *The Cooktown Courier,* 26 December 1874, p. 2.
150 *CHPRA,* 16 December 1874, p. 3.
151 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 4 August 1875, p. 3.
152 *The Cooktown Courier,* 5 February 1876, p. 2.
153 *The Cooktown Courier,* 25 March 1876, p. 3.
154 *The Cooktown Courier,* 5 February 1876, p. 2.
155 *The Cooktown Courier,* 7 February 1877, p. 2.
156 *The Cooktown Courier,* 21 July 1877, p. 3.
157 *The Cooktown Courier,* 21 July 1877, p. 3.

But compared to many other provincial towns, both in Queensland and New South Wales, Cooktown had done extremely well in a relatively short time. Newcastle, for example, which had been settled since 1804, still had 'not one decently paved street or one healthy drain' by the early 1880s.[158]

On the latter point of 'healthy drains', Cooktown similarly did not fare too well, at least in its early years. The provision of at least one 'earth closet' (see advertisement at Plate 4.1) per licensed hotel had been made mandatory by the local magistrates court as early as April 1874.[159] But the waste from them, as well as the night-soil from the open pans of most residential dwellings, was simply dumped into the mangrove swamp adjacent to the wharf area.[160]

Plate 4.1 - An Example of a Sanitary Earth Closet circa 1870s

Source: As reproduced in M. Cannon, *Australia in the Victorian age: life in the cities,* Penguin, Ringwood, 1988, p. 161.

By mid 1875, this open sewer was the source of persistent editorial criticism in the local newspapers. *The Cooktown Herald and Palmer River Advertiser,* for example, described it as 'a hotbed for the germinating of ... a thousand attendant physical evils', with the smell 'of strength enough in effervescence to knock down ... twenty bullocks'.[161] Interestingly, the notoriety of Cooktown's cesspool reportedly reached Hong Kong. The captain of the SS *Killarney,* upon his arrival in Cooktown with a new batch of Chinese

158 See M. Cannon, *Australia in the Victorian age: life in the cities,* Penguin, Ringwood, 1988, p. 156.

159 *CHPRA,* 29 April 1874, p. 2.

160 *CHPRA,* 5 May 1875, p. 2.

161 *CHPRA,* 5 May 1875, p. 2.

immigrants in May 1875, claimed that placards had recently been liberally displayed in the streets of Hong Kong (presumably by a detractor) claiming that

> Cooktown is the most unhealthy spot on earth ...[with] a cesspool of filth in the very centre of the town and a death rate of 100 per day.[162]

By around 1877, Cooktown's open sewer problem had largely been alleviated, with the promulgation of council by-laws requiring that night-soil be buried in trenches some distance from the town, and with the eventual flushing of the contents of the mangrove swamp seawards.[163] On that basis, Cooktown again had progressed reasonably well in comparison to many southern towns and cities. Open cesspools, for example, were a feature of everyday life in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne throughout the 1860s. Moreover, earth closets only came into regular use in Melbourne's hotels and offices in the 1880s, while pan collection in Perth did not begin until 1888.[164]

Probably the main focus of editorial criticism in Cooktown's newspapers, though, was on the issue of water. During 1874 and early 1875, it seems that most businesses and residents were able to satisfy their requirements by small-scale carting from the numerous springs and creeks on the southern slopes of Grassy Hill or on the foothills of Mount Cook. By late 1875, however, the water carting business had largely fallen into the hands of Chinese carters, who obtained their supplies from Two Mile Creek, a source which had become increasingly befouled by the activities of Chinese market gardeners.[165]

Throughout the late 1870s, therefore, newspaper editorials in Cooktown regularly lambasted the local council for its failure to provide a reliable supply of fresh water to the town. At the same time, editorials proposed a range of options including, for example, the sinking of wells, damming nearby creeks and constructing underground storage tanks, fed

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162 As reported in *CHPRA,* 29 May 1875, p. 2. The captain claimed that the adverse publicity had resulted in the loss of 300 prospective passengers.

163 *CHPRA,* 9 September 1876, p. 2.

164 Cannon, *Life in the cities,* pp. 154-62.

165 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 15 November 1876, p. 2 describing the water from there as 'unfit to drink'. A secondary concern was that water became increasingly scarce (and more polluted) during the dry season. The steamer *Exeter*, for example, was detained in Cooktown for over two days in November 1875 because of the shortage of water for its boilers, eventually having to send small boats 20 miles upriver: see *CHPRA*, 27 November 1875, p. 2.

from the run-off of the nine large iron-roofed government buildings in the town.[166] The constant theme of the editorials was also that Cooktown's ongoing scourge of fevers and other epidemics was directly attributable to the impurity of its water supply.[167]

Eventually, in the late 1880s, Cooktown's local council decided to fund the provision of a town water supply, based on the plans and estimates of the 1884 inspection report of a team from the Queensland Government's Water Supply Department.[168] That report indicated that a supply of 30 gallons per person per day, for a population of some 4000, could be provided for around £28,000.[169] In that regard, Cooktown certainly was lagging behind the capital cities, at least, which had reticulated water in Sydney in the 1850s, Melbourne in 1857, Adelaide in the late 1850s and Brisbane in the late 1860s.[170]

Fittingly, perhaps, the final subject in this discussion of Cooktown's early development and physical growth is the local cemetery. It was established, probably in mid 1874, on a large block of land on the northern side of the road leading towards the Palmer (at the bottom end of Charlotte Street). Before that, bodies were buried in a vacant lot alongside the first hospital in Green Street, while some were possibly simply buried 'in the bush'.[171] The first recorded mention of the cemetery was in July 1875 in the context of a government grant of £100 for fencing, leading a local newspaper to express the hope that 'the careless apathy that has hitherto been exhibited ... [towards] the repository of the dead will no longer exist'.[172]

The cemetery register, which lists the details of the 277 Europeans and 145 Chinese buried in the period to 1885, has its earliest interments recorded as 1877.[173] It seems, therefore, that the details of the eighty or so people who died in the Cooktown hospital between 1874 and 1876, and those

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166 See *CHPRA,* 3 November 1875, p. 2 and 27 January 1877, p. 2 and *The Cooktown Courier,* 25 October 1876, p. 2.

167 See *CHPRA,* 18 August 1877, p. 2.

168 See their report in *QVP,* 3, 1884, pp. 861-4.

169 See *QVP,* 3, 1884, p. 864.

170 See Cannon, *Life in the cities*, pp. 165-8.

171 Six or seven bodies were reportedly buried in what was to become Green Street itself. They were removed to the cemetery, with the appropriate government approvals, in late 1877: see *CHPRA,* 13 October 1877, p. 2.

172 See *CHPRA,* 17 July 1875, p. 2.

173 See *Cook Shire Burial Register to 1920 and monumental inscriptions to 1986,* Cairns and District Family History Society, Cairns, 1989.

residents of Cooktown who died from natural causes over the same period (probably another 130 or so), have largely been lost to history.[174]

That aside, the only other significant mention of the cemetery in contemporary accounts was in relation to the Chinese. A newspaper editorial in September 1875 complained that the Chinese practice of burying coffins in very shallow graves was unacceptable 'in a tropical climate where putrefaction rapidly sets in', noting that some had been interred so shallowly that the coffins lay exposed on the surface.[175] One possibility is that such graves belonged to Chinese 'paupers', who had been buried either by their countrymen or contracted white undertakers, with little regard for the proprieties. Another, alluded to by Holthouse in *River of gold,* is that shallowly-dug Chinese graves were temporary repositories and that

> in due course, the relatives of every Chinese who died on the Palmer — if they could afford it — had his bones dug up and shipped home to China in a large earthernware jar.[176]

While that latter explanation undoubtedly has some cultural credibility, it does not explain why several hundred Chinese remain buried in the Cooktown cemetery, especially given that a number of them — with occupations listed as storekeeper, carpenter, gardener, drayman and farmer — would presumably have had the means for their remains to be repatriated to China. Indeed, although the issue is not in itself particularly significant, it typifies much of the preceding discussion on Cooktown's transition from 'tent city to town' — that is, the need to differentiate between probable reality and the often more entertaining blend of fact and fiction, based frequently on popular stereotypes of brave and hardy white pioneers labouring on the frontiers of 'civilisation'.

An Atypical Transition?

The foregoing observation leads reasonably to the question of whether Cooktown's early physical growth and commercial progress were typical of the development of other coastal or provincial towns and centres in

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174 Hospital deaths 1874-76 taken from *QVP,* 1, 1876, p. 177; 2, 1876, p. 689 and 1, 1878, p. 913.

175 *CHPRA,* 25 September 1875, p. 2.

176 Holthouse, *River of gold,* p. 146. Holthouse also asserts that the Chinese frequently smuggled out gold in such jars, figuring that no-one in customs would be inclined to pull out the bones to look for contraband: *River of gold,* p. 147.

Queensland and elsewhere in Australia and whether, therefore, the 'lessons' of Cooktown have wider application. Obviously, the process of urbanisation includes far more than simply physical growth and commercial development. But it would seem a useful exercise if it were possible to compare some of the key issues discussed already in this chapter against the experiences of, say, Townsville, Cardwell, Cairns and Charters Towers.

Such a comparison is attempted in Chapter 8 of this study, which is based largely on an assessment of the conclusions of the preceding chapters against the conclusions of already-published work. What can be said at this stage of the study is that Cooktown in its early years was not fundamentally or even markedly different, in terms of its *physical development,* from most other 'frontier' townships in Queensland or Australia. It is also evident that the presence and influence of a large Chinese community had a major impact on the town, both in an economic and social sense, though within the typical pattern of physical development. The analysis in this chapter has highlighted the key role played by the Chinese business community in Cooktown across the peak years 1876 to 1879, typically at the expense of the European business community. It has also confirmed that those who frequently benefited most from gold mining were those involved in the service industries, especially the carrying trade.

Perhaps the major point of difference would be that Cooktown was established primarily as an entry point for the Palmer River goldfields, rather than a typical population settlement or service centre. In consequence, much of the Government's early focus and expenditure were on revenue collection. In addition, the township developed largely as a trading centre, rather than a residential community.

Finally, it is also clear that many of the early and popular accounts of the formative years of Cooktown were shallow, exaggerated and largely seen from the perspective of a white male of nineteenth-century British background. That is not to be unduly critical of such contemporary accounts, given that most were simply a product of their time. Rather, the analysis and discussion of this chapter has been intended to refute the more fanciful claims

and 'set the scene' for Chapter 5 'A Frontier Community', which addresses the day-to-day lives of the residents of Cooktown as it made its transition from 'tent city to town'.

CHAPTER 5 - A FRONTIER COMMUNITY

Previous chapters have addressed the early years of Cooktown in terms of its historical and physical development, with little emphasis on the people of the town. This chapter focuses on the social formation of the Cooktown community, addressing particularly the composition, origins and aspirations of the early settlers.

Perhaps more importantly, it also addresses the extent of community participation in civic affairs, as well as the dynamics involved in the development of the community as an organisation capable of advancing the interests of the town. While it is largely a truism, the following editorial assertion of early January 1877 seems a particularly apt introduction to this chapter, namely that

> ... the fate of Cooktown is in the hands of its own inhabitants.[1]

To that end, the two local newspapers published numerous editorials throughout the mid 1870s bemoaning the apathy of the townspeople towards civic affairs and agitating for a more robust sense of community.[2] The typical outcome was a spate of public meetings in the town, at which speaker after speaker castigated the government-of-the-day in Brisbane for its neglect of northern interests, while extolling the virtues of Cooktown and the prospects of the goldfields of its hinterland. A not infrequent theme was that unless Brisbane apportioned a fairer share of financial resources, the Far North would secede with Cooktown as its capital.[3]

Behind the hyperbole of a succession of civic and business leaders, however, it is evident that Cooktown was anything but a cohesive community. The influx of miners to the Palmer created a constant stream

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1 *The Cooktown Courier,* 3 January 1877, p. 3.

2 See, for example, the editorial in *The Cooktown Courier,* 20 June 1874, p. 3 noting that 'we feel bound to remonstrate against the apathy and want of public spirit displayed by the people of Cooktown'.

3 See, for example, the editorial in *The Cooktown Courier,* 4 July 1877, p. 3 asserting that 'if the government persists in refusing us our just demands ... [our only remaining] course is simply to cut the painter'.

of transients and short-term visitors, none of whom cared one wit for Cooktown or its community. Similarly, many of the merchants of Cooktown itself were far more interested in short-term profits than the longer-term viability of the town. With every new rush, a proportion would quit the town to try their luck elsewhere. Severe divisions also existed within the semi-permanent business community of the town, involving several key figures in at least twelve criminal court proceedings for assault or abusive language in 1876 and 1877 alone.[4]

Overlaying these realities were two added issues. The first was that the climate of Cooktown was widely considered to be unsuited for European habitation. Many of the 'residents', therefore, sent their wives and children south to recuperate for several months each year, while they stayed on to persist as long as they could. The underlying sentiment was that residency in Cooktown was a temporary expedient, with the opportunity to make 'a quick buck' needing to be balanced against the detriment to one's health.

The second issue militating against a sense of community was that Chinese reputedly at times made up half the town's population. That was an exaggeration. Nevertheless, the considerable Chinese presence not only split the town along racial lines, but created further divisions within the European business community between those who benefited from the throughput of Chinese immigrants and those who claimed that the Chinese were taking jobs and resources away from Queenslanders. Against such a background of divisiveness, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Cooktown community of the 1870s and early 1880s was unable to put in place the measures necessary to ensure the town's longer-term viability.

Analysing the Community

How best to analyse such a community, in terms of structure and lifestyle, as well as its dynamics, is a moot point. An anecdotal account, such as that used in Holthouse's *River of gold*, could be both informative and entertaining.[5] The downside is that narrative-based studies provide

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4 This issue is discussed in more detail later in the chapter under the heading 'Community Interest in Civic Affairs'.

5 See H. Holthouse, *River of gold: the story of the Palmer River gold rush,* Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1967.

little opportunity for the meaningful analysis of such structural elements as age, sex, place of origin, marital status, occupation etc. A better option, as discussed in Chapter 1, would seem to be a balanced combination of narrative and quantitative methodology, with descriptive prose being used to illustrate the interpretative generalisations derived from quantitative analysis.

The difficulty in applying a quantitative methodology to the study of the Cooktown community in the 1870s is in deciding (or simply locating) a suitable statistical base. One fleeting consideration was to use data from census returns, such as used in America by Stephan Thernstrom in *The other Bostonians* and by Elizabeth Pleck in *Black migration and poverty.*[6] The problem in relation to Cooktown is that the individual census schedules for Queensland from 1876 and 1881 are no longer available, nor were detailed city directories ever compiled such as those used by Thernstrom and Pleck to trace individuals from one census period to the next.[7]

Similarly, none of the extant directories, rolls or almanacs for Cooktown from that era provides anything like a comprehensive listing of the individuals who were resident in the town between 1873 and 1885. Moreover, any single listing would only capture a small proportion of those who were resident across the period, given the estimate by Thernstrom (admittedly for an American city) that the population flow over a ten-year period was often between six and twelve times the population present at any one time.[8]

Compiling a Cooktown Register

It was decided for this study, therefore, to attempt to create a data base of every individual who resided in Cooktown between 1873 and 1885, derived from the range of available source materials. Those sources included electoral rolls, directories, almanacs, court records,

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6 See S. Thernstrom, *The other Bostonians: poverty and progress in the American metropolis 1880-1970,* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1973 and E. Pleck, *Black migration and poverty: Boston 1865-1900,* Academic Press, New York, 1979.

7 The nearest equivalent for Queensland are electoral rolls, post office directories and business almanacs. Pleck also had access to Civil War pension records: see Pleck, *Black migration,* preface p. xv.

8 See T. Hershberg, 'The new urban history: towards an interdisciplinary history of the city', *Journal of Urban History,* 5, 1, November 1978, p. 20.

burial registers, newspapers, petitions, registers of the sale of crown lands, shipping lists, school records, *Queensland Government gazettes, Votes and proceedings of the Legislative Assembly [QVP],* official correspondence and the numerous primary source reminiscences and accounts of the early days of Cooktown.

The end result was a register of 2615 names, with an average annual population across the period of 532 individuals. Notable by their absence were Aborigines (only one name recorded across the period), while women, children and Chinese were considerably under-represented. Using Thernstrom's estimate of a population turnover of six times over a decade, the register might optimally have had a total of 11,700 names (taking the average population of Cooktown across the period 1874-85 as around 1950 — see Figure 5.1 at page 210 — multiplied by Thernstrom's figure of six). It could be argued, therefore, that the register as compiled captured only about 20 per cent of the actual residents (and considerably less if one used Thernstrom's higher estimate of twelve).

Given, however, that the primary purpose of the register has been to quantify key variables of the *working population* of Cooktown (age structure, race, occupations and civic involvement), it can be argued that the exclusion of children and women engaged in home duties and unskilled Chinese workers is not a critical omission. Indeed, accepting — from census data and extrapolations — that the town had an average school student population of around 300 across the period, a pre-school children population of around 175 and a home duties population of around 350 women, it seems reasonable to accept that the yearly average of 470 or so adult male Europeans listed in the register represented around 45 per cent of all white males present in Cooktown (on average) across the period 1873-1885 (see the calculations at Table 5.1).

Table 5.1 - Average Composition of Cooktown's European Population 1873-1885

Children (pre-school age)	Children (school age)	Women (home duties)	Women (workforce)	Men (unemployed and workforce)	Total
175	300	350	50	1075	1950

Note: Chinese population probably varied between 100 and 1500 (as discussed later).

Source: Figures for women and children derived primarily from 1876 and 1881 census details: see *Votes and proceedings of the Legislative Assembly of Queensland [QVP], 2, 1877, p. 421 and* QVP, *2, 1882, pp. 913 and 975.*

The Register as a Data Base

In its design, the register made provision for the compilation of data, by individual, in relation to age, sex, marital status, place of origin, date of arrival, occupation, occupational mobility, years resident and civic involvement, for each of the years 1874 to 1885. The data base program employed was Microsoft ACCESS, operated on a lap-top 386 computer.[9] For each of the structural elements, various numeric codes were used as shown at Tables 5.2 to 5.6.[10]

Table 5.2 - Data Base Codes for Age Groupings

0: not known	6: 45-53 years
1: 0-8 years	7: 54-62 years
2: 9-17 years	8: 63-71 years
3: 18-26 years	9: 72-80 years
4: 27-35 years	10: 81-89 years
5: 36-44 years	11: 90 and over years

Table 5.3 - Data Base Codes for Sex and Marital Status

0: not known	6: female - single 16 years and over
1: male - marital status not known	7: male - married
2: female - marital status not known	8: female - married
3: male under 16 years	9: male - widowed or divorced
4: female under 16 years	10: female - widowed or divorced
5: male - single 16 years and over	

9 The programming was provided by John O'Neill of Mercadier Strategic Developments, North Lyneham ACT, (06) 257 6873.

10 Codes for years resident (0-12) matched the number of years. Codes for occupational mobility provided for all variations between the occupational groupings at Table 5.5.

Note: Chinese population probably varied between 100 and 1500 (as discussed later).

Source: Figures for women and children derived primarily from 1876 and 1881 census details: see *Votes and proceedings of the Legislative Assembly of Queensland [QVP], 2, 1877, p. 421 and* QVP, *2, 1882, pp. 913 and 975.*

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4: 27-35 years	10: 81-89 years
5: 36-44 years	11: 90 and over years

Note: 8 year-range selected to achieve optimal grouping of infants (code 1), youths (2) and young adults (3).

Table 5.3 - Data Base Codes for Sex and Marital Status

0: not known	6: female - single 16 years and over
1: male - marital status not known	7: male - married
2: female - marital status not known	8: female - married
3: male under 16 years	9: male - widowed or divorced
4: female under 16 years	10: female - widowed or divorced
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9 The programming was provided by John O'Neill of Mercadier Strategic Developments, North Lyneham ACT, (06) 257 6873.

10 Codes for years resident (0-12) matched the number of years. Codes for occupational mobility provided for all variations between the occupational groupings at Table 5.5.

Table 5.4 - Data Base Codes for Place of Origin

0: not known	7: Americas
1: Brisbane	8: South Pacific including New Zealand
2: elsewhere in Queensland	9: China
3: other Australian colonies	10: elsewhere
4: Great Britain	11: born in Cooktown
5: Ireland	12: Aborigine
6: other Europe	

Table 5.5 - Data Base Codes for Occupations

(the structure of this table is discussed later in the chapter)

0: not known	8: self-employed mercantile (European)
1: unemployed, home duties, student	9: unskilled manual (Chinese)
2: unskilled manual (European)	10: semi-skilled manual (Chinese)
3: semi-skilled manual (European)	11: artisan (Chinese)
4: artisan (European)	12: basic white collar (Chinese)
5: basic white collar (European)	13: managerial white collar (Chinese)
6: managerial white collar (European)	14: professional white collar (Chinese)
7: professional white collar (European)	15: self-employed mercantile (Chinese)

Notes:

1. Codes 2 and 9 relate primarily to labourers.
2. Codes 3 and 10 include such occupations as miner, gardener, fisherman, boatman, cook, storeman, groom, fencer, painter, packer, waitress, barman, drayman, domestic servant.
3. Codes 4 and 11 include such occupations as blacksmith, baker, saddler, jeweller, tentmaker, carpenter, butcher, chemist, tinsmith, hairdresser, dressmaker, bootmaker, chef.
4. Codes 5 and 12 include such occupations as shop assistant, clerk, policeman, teller, tutor, nurse, river pilot, journalist, rate collector, billiard room proprietor.
5. Codes 6 and 13 include such occupations as engineer, accountant, police sergeant or sub-inspector, harbour master, surveyor, teacher, newspaper editor, matron, town clerk.
6. Codes 7 and 14 include such occupations as solicitor, doctor, magistrate, police inspector, headmaster, minister of religion, bank manager.
7. Codes 8 and 15 include such occupations as merchant, shopkeeper, grocer, auctioneer, carrier, agent, publican, contractor, cordial maker.

Table 5.6 - Data Base Codes for Civic Involvement

0:	resident for 0-12 months and no civic involvement
1:	resident for 1 year " " " "
2:	resident for 2 years " " " "
3:	resident for 3 years " " " "
4:	resident for 4 years " " " "
5:	mayor, alderman or JP and occupational grouping 0-3
6:	" 4
7:	" 5
8:	" 6
9:	" 7
10:	" 8
11:	official committee person and occupational grouping 0-3
12:	" 4
13:	" 5
14:	" 6
15:	" 7
16:	" 8
17:	unofficial committee person and occupational grouping 0-3
18:	" 4
19:	" 5
20:	" 6
21:	" 7
22:	" 8
23:	previous mayor, alderman or JP and not 5-22
24:	previous official committee person and not 5-22

Notes:
1. Official committees include those for organisations funded or subsidised by the government eg hospital, education, fire brigade, school of arts.
2. Unofficial committees include those receiving no direct government funding eg jockey club, victuallers association, progress association, railway league, cricket club, carriers association, temperance society.

Results of the Data Base Compilation

Needless to say, much of the information sought for the various data matrices was not available, resulting in a default entry of '0' or not known. Of the possible 44,688 entries, however, data was entered for 23,487, representing a value input entry of 52.6 per cent.[11] As can be seen at Table 5.7 (on next page), the information most available related to years resident, followed by sex and marital status, followed by civic involvement. The information least available related to place of origin, followed by age and occupational mobility.

11 The figure of 44,688 was calculated by multiplying the average number of individuals (532) by the years (12) and then by variable columns (7).

Table 5.7 - Availability of Information for Entry on Data Base

Element	Availability (%)
Years resident	100
Civic involvement	59.2
Occupation	49.8
Occupational mobility	30.0
Age	20.5
Place of origin	8.9
Average	52.6

Beyond the raw data output shown at Table 5.7, it is not intended here, or elsewhere within this chapter, to table the various spreadsheet summaries, not least because the data is largely meaningless without close cross-referencing to the various data base codes (although the summaries are available to anyone interested). Rather, it seems more useful to move to an analysis of the various elements of the community structure of Cooktown, using the summaries — supplemented by other quantitative and qualitative source materials — as the analytical basis for discussion.

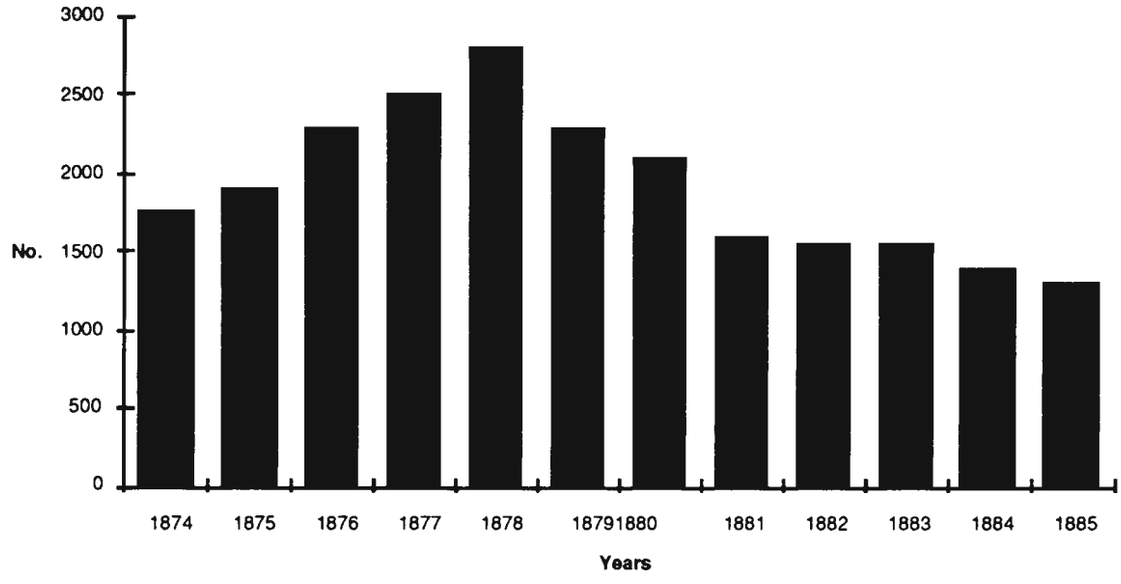
Early Population Numbers

As discussed in Chapter 4 under the heading 'Coping with the Influx of Population', many of the early estimates of Cooktown's population were obviously exaggerated or included would-be miners readying to proceed to the Palmer River. Figure 4.1 (at page 142), it will be recalled, estimated that of the some 4000 people present in Cooktown in May 1874, around 2000 of them were either waiting for rivers between Cooktown and the Palmer to subside, or were disgruntled miners from the 'return rush' of April 1874 waiting for passage south.

That is not to under-estimate, of course, the practical difficulties in attempting to determine the size of the town's population in such a fluid situation. Indeed, even the semi-permanent population often varied by several hundred from month to month, as residents left to try their luck at

newly-discovered fields.[12] On balance, it seems reasonable to accept, based on a variety of sources, that the population of Cooktown across the period fluctuated between 1300 and 2800 as shown at Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1 - The Estimated Population of Cooktown 1874-1885
(as at 30 June each year)



Source: Derived from a variety of sources, including the 1876 census report in *QVP*, 2, 1877, p. 336 and the 1881 census report in *QVP*, 1, 1882, p. 948, and extrapolations by the author.

What Figure 5.1 does not show is the extremely high turnover of population within the annual totals. Figure 5.2 (on next page), for example, using data from the 'years resident' spreadsheet of the sample register, shows that of the 500 or 600 Europeans listed as resident each year in Cooktown, an average of 45 per cent of them had either arrived in the town or departed from it during that year. Moreover, between 1875 and 1879, the turnover rate was nearer to 50 per cent, going as high as 63 per cent in 1878. Obviously, a community in which half of the population turned over each year could hardly be expected to develop easily any sense of cohesion or civic pride.

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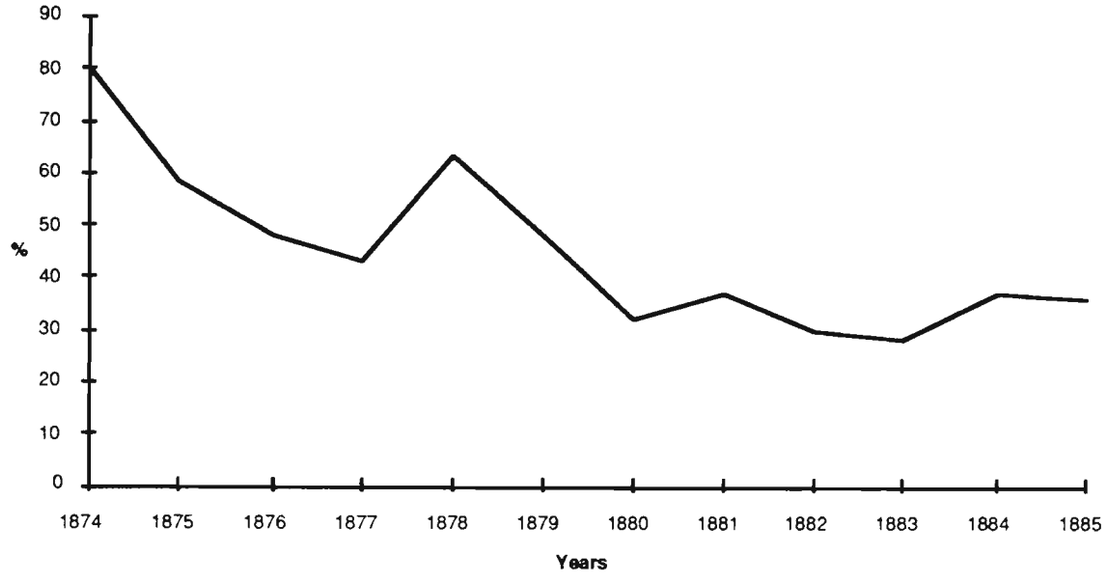
12 An editorial in *The Cooktown Courier*, 25 July 1874, p. 2, for example, noted that news from the Palmer River 'has induced quite a number of townspeople ... to visit the Palmer and try their luck'.

Figure 5.2 - Population Turnover (of Europeans) within the Cooktown Register Sample
(the percentage of the sampled population arriving or departing each year)



The Persistence of the Population

It is also evident from the sample register (as shown at Table 5.8 below) that, on average, two-thirds of those departing the town each year had been resident for less than twelve months and that only around 15 per cent of each year's intake of residents stayed in the town for five years or more.

Table 5.8 - Annual Departure Rate of Europeans within the Cooktown Register Sample
(showing the percentage of each year's intake who had departed after x years)

Year	After 1 Year	2 Years	3 Years	4 Years	5 Years
1874	60	71	79	80	84
1875	71	79	79	88	90
1876	65	67	79	84	87
1877	75	82	86	91	92
1878	69	75	81	83	84
1879*	37	51	53	54	63
1880	78	83	84	87	89
1881	82	84	88	91	N/A
1882	67	71	80	N/A	N/A
1883	60	70	N/A	N/A	N/A
1884	64	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Average	66	73	79	82	84

Note: The markedly higher persistence rates for those arriving in 1879 cannot readily be explained.

The reasons for such high turnovers and low persistence rates are probably several. Most obvious is that a sizeable number of residents were lured to try their luck at the Palmer River and Hodgkinson goldfields, especially in the boom years of 1874, 1875 and 1876. Others went certainly to new settlements elsewhere along the Far North Queensland coastline, in the hope of establishing a mercantile foothold in what were being touted at the time as the future service centres for the goldfields of the region.[13] A number may also have found the heat, the humidity and the 'frontier' conditions simply too much to bear.[14]

It is also plausible that some European merchants and carriers were able to make their fortune within the space of a number of months (or perhaps within a single dry season in the case of carriers) and then quit Cooktown for southern ports.[15] Certainly, a similar accusation was frequently levelled at the Chinese who, as can be seen from Table 5.9 (on next page), had even lower persistence rates than the European population. In the case of the Chinese, however, higher turnovers related in part also to the terms of indenture of the majority of labourers (as will be discussed shortly). Chinese merchants were probably also even more mobile than their European counterparts in terms of their preparedness to relocate to new fields.

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13 Several well-established merchants in Cooktown, for example, including three sitting aldermen, left to set up new businesses in nearby coastal settlements in July/August 1877: see *The Cooktown Courier,* 28 July 1877, p. 3 and 8 August 1877, p. 3.

14 The issue of environmental hardships is discussed later in this chapter under the heading of 'Health and Mortality'.

15 In Chapter 4 under the heading 'The Carriers', for example, it was noted that 'there was generally more to be made from the carrying trade than there was from prospecting'.

Table 5.9 - Annual Departure Rate of Chinese within the Cooktown Register Sample
(showing the percentage of each year's intake who had departed after x years)

Year	After 1 year	2 years	3 years	4 years	5 years
1874*	0	0	50	75	75
1875	60	70	80	90	90
1876	89	93	100	100	100
1877	86	90	94	94	96
1878	98	98	98	100	100
1879	93	96	96	100	100
1880	88	94	94	97	97
1881	92	97	100	100	100
1882	94	94	94	N/A	N/A
1883	82	100	100	100	100
1884	100	100	100	100	100
Chinese Average	**80**	**85**	**91**	**96**	**96**
European Average (from Table 5.8)	**66**	**73**	**79**	**82**	**84**

Note: Five of the twenty-four Chinese merchants who arrived in 1874-75 were still resident in 1878; three of them were still trading in 1884.

The consequences of high population turnovers and low persistence rates for both the European and Chinese communities of Cooktown will be discussed later in this chapter under the heading 'Community Interest in Civic Affiars'.

Place of Origin of the Early Settlers

Unfortunately, information as to the place of origin of individuals within the sample register was rarely available. There are, for example, no detailed passenger lists available (or perhaps ever prepared) for the scores of ships which conveyed would-be miners and settlers to Cooktown from ports along the eastern Australian seaboard or from Hong Kong.[16] Even where passenger lists are available, such as those for ships arriving from Great Britain and Ireland from November 1881 onwards, it is almost

16 Well-to-do passengers travelling in 'cabin-class' were normally listed by name in the Cooktown newspapers upon arrival. Those travelling 'in steerage', however, were simply noted as a total number.

impossible to determine whether immigrants landing at Cooktown were intending residents or were destined for the goldfields of the hinterland.[17]

The paucity of data is compounded by the need to differentiate between place of birth and the individual's residential location immediately before his or her arrival in Cooktown. For the purposes of this study, the primary focus is on the latter, rather than the fact that a person was, for example, of Irish extraction. The reason for that focus is that it would seem useful, in terms of better understanding community structure, to be able to analyse where individuals were living and what their occupations were before their arrival in Cooktown, rather than simply their nationality.[18]

In the event, such an aim has largely been unfulfilled. What seems evident, however, is that in the years from October 1873 until November 1881, *all* the Europeans in Cooktown (and all the Chinese before late March 1875) arrived either overland from elsewhere in eastern Australia or *via* a port on the Australian eastern seaboard.[19] The first ship to berth at Cooktown directly from Europe was the RMS *Chyebassa,* which arrived from Plymouth on 19 November 1881 with nine passengers.[20] There also seems to be no evidence, at least across the years 1874 to 1877, of ships arriving directly from New Zealand or from California.[21]

From the available newspaper records of ships arriving from ports on the Australian eastern seaboard, it is difficult to assess the main embarkation points. The (incomplete) records of *The Cooktown Courier* and

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17 In a few instances, it has proved possible to use passenger list information (in relation to place of origin, age and marital status of an individual arriving from Europe) to supplement an entry where the same individual is confirmed as a resident of Cooktown subsequent to his or her arrival.

18 It was also hoped that such an approach would facilitate the discussion in Chapter 6 'Small Town in a Large Colony' of the role played by Cooktown and the Palmer River goldfields in encouraging both immigration and the flow of investment capital to Queensland during the 1870s and 1880s.

19 The immigration to Cooktown returns in successive issues of *QVP* for example, show nil arrivals from Great Britain, Ireland or Europe between 1874 and 1881, and nil arrivals of Chinese before 1875.

20 See Immigration Department inwards passenger register 1881, pp. 549-50, IMM/116, Queensland State Archives (QSA).

21 *The Cooktown Herald and Palmer River Advertiser (CHPRA),* for example, noted in March 1874 that 'none at all ... [had yet arrived] from New Zealand': *CHPRA,* 25 March 1874, p. 2. Similarly, *The Cooktown Courier,* 2 May 1877, p. 3 noted (without subsequent confirmation) 'a report that several miners from California [are] en route to Cooktown from San Francisco'.

Cooktown Herald for 1875, for example, indicate that at least 4008 individuals disembarked in Cooktown from southern ports in 1875, of whom 2610 were recorded in immigration records as being from Australian colonies other than Queensland.[22] That broadly suggests that only around 1400 persons or 35 per cent of the total were from Queensland.

The probability is, of course, that most of the would-be miners and settlers from Queensland had already proceeded by ship or overland in 1874. Certainly, Table 5.10, which shows the available details of all ships arriving in Cooktown for the months of March (two weeks only) and October 1874, suggests that probably around 70 per cent of the arrivals were from elsewhere in Queensland, with the New South Wales share almost certainly less than 30 per cent.

Table 5.10 - Ships Arriving in Cooktown from Australian Ports in March and October 1874

Date	Vessel	Sydney passengers	Queensland passengers	Unknown embarkation *
20/3/74	Tararua	-	30	-
22/3/74	Isabelle	-	37	-
26/3/74	Victoria	74	-	-
27/3/74	Boomerang	-	161	-
28/3/74	Princess Louise	37	-	-
30/3/74	Marquis of Lorne	-	20	-
"	Emma Jane	-	50	-
"	Morning Light	-	20	-
"	Kishon	-	130	-
"	African Maid	-	85	-
"	Wonga Wonga	-	-	60
"	Western	-	-	24
5/10/74	Atjeh	-	93	-
10/10/74	Florence Irving	-	108	-
25/10/74	Leichhardt	-	-	133
26/10/74	Wonga Wonga	-	-	101
29/10/74	Alexandria	47	-	-
30/10/74	Florence Irving	-	41	-
Totals		**158**	**775**	**318**
Percentages		**12.6**	**61.9**	**25.5**

See over /

22 The figure of 4008 derived from the inwards shipping lists of *The Cooktown Courier* and *Cooktown Herald* for 1875. The figure of 2610 derived from the 'immigration to Cooktown' return as published in *QVP*, 2, 1876, p. 451.

Note: This heading for ships which departed from Sydney but called at intermediate ports in Queensland.

Sources: *The Cooktown Courier* and *Cooktown Herald,* 25 March 1874 to 1 April 1874 and 10 October to 31 October 1874.

It seems reasonable to assume, therefore, based on the calculations shown at Table 5.11 below, that close to 60 per cent of the individuals arriving in Cooktown from eastern Australia between November 1873 and December 1876 (the peak years of influx) were from elsewhere in Queensland, with the majority of the remainder from Sydney or northern New South Wales. As will be discussed shortly, the 1874 and 1875 figures included a number of Chinese.

Table 5.11 - The Embarkation Point of Arrivals in Cooktown 1873-1876
(from ports on the eastern Australian seaboard)

Year	Elsewhere in Queensland	NSW	Total	Notes
1873	400 (100%)	-	400	1
1874	4650 (75%)	1550 (25%)	6200	2
1875	1398 (35%)	2610 (65%)	4008	3
1876	1647 (50%)	1647 (50%)	3294	4
Total	**8095 (58%)**	**5807 (42%)**	**13902**	**5**

Notes:
1. Figure of 400 is an estimate by the author.
2. Figure of 6200 is an estimate by the author, used previously at Table 4.2, derived by extrapolation from official returns on the population of the goldfields. The break-up of 75%-25% derived from Table 5.10 and the discussion in its following paragraph.
3. The figure of 4008 taken from newspaper records as discussed previously (see footnote 22). The break-up of 65%-35% based on official immigration records (see footnote 22 also).
4. The figure of 3294 derived from official immigration records (see *QVP,* 2,1877, pp. 970-1) plus an estimate by the author of 2000 individuals arriving from elsewhere in Queensland. The break-up of 50%-50% estimated by the author, based on the trend over the previous years.
5. The percentage figures shown against the sub-totals closely proximate the Queensland and 'other Australians' composition figures at Figure 5.3 (to follow).

The proportion of Queenslanders versus New South Welshmen, or Europeans versus Chinese, who stayed in Cooktown from the 13,902 arrivals at Table 5.11 cannot be ascertained. From anecdotal accounts, it would seem that most of the early storekeepers, publicans and artisans in Cooktown came from Brisbane, Maryborough, Rockhampton, Townsville or Cardwell.[23] There are also a number of mentions in the Cooktown

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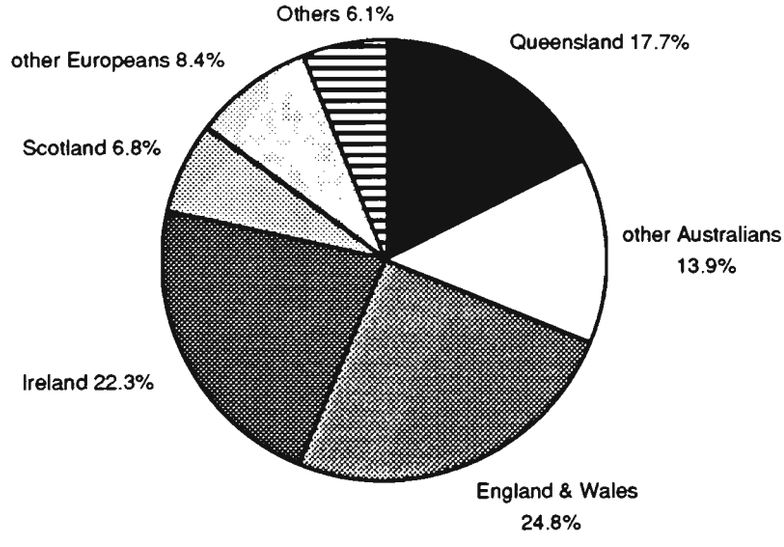
23 *The Brisbane Courier,* it will be recalled from Chapter 2, noted that a contingent departing on the SS *Lord Ashley* on 16 January 1874 included 'several storekeepers ... who have migrated with their effects': *The Brisbane Courier,* 17 January 1874, p. 4.

newspapers of newly-arrived merchants from Ravenswood, Charters Towers and Millchester. There are also several reports which suggest that a number of the early Chinese merchants in the town were from Sydney. *The Cooktown Courier,* for example, noted in mid June 1874 that

> ... a fresh batch [of Chinese from southern ports] arrived here on Monday last. [F]rom Sydney, heavy shipments of goods are weekly arriving for them direct.[24]

Putting aside the Chinese for a moment, it is also somewhat unclear what proportion of the early European population in Cooktown was Queensland or Australian-born against those born overseas. The 1876 census, as illustrated at Figure 5.3, shows that Australian-born settlers in the combined settlements of Cooktown, Laura and Normanby River constituted 31.6 per cent of the non-Chinese population, while those born in the British Isles constituted 53.9 per cent. It is presumed that the population structure was broadly similar in 1874 and 1875, and that Cooktown itself was broadly representative of the wider subdivision.[25]

Figure 5.3 - The Composition of the Non-Chinese Population in the Cooktown Subdivision in 1876



Source: 1876 census statistics *QVP,* 2, 1877, p. 505.

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24 *The Cooktown Courier,* 13 June 1874, p. 3.

25 The percentage for Queensland-born in 1874 would probably have been higher, reflecting the early dominance of arrivals from elsewhere in Queensland as shown at Table 5.11, (see p. 216).

Queensland-wide in 1876, the percentages for Australian-born against those born in the British Isles (33.4 and 43.2 per cent respectively) were very similar to those in the Cooktown subdivision.[26] The percentage of Queensland-born in the Cooktown subdivision was much lower, however, reflecting the higher proportion of those from the southern states (Queensland-born in Queensland 36.0 per cent; in Cooktown subdivision 17.7 per cent). Similarly, the Cooktown subdivision had a slightly higher proportion of those born in Ireland than across the state (Ireland-born in Queensland 15.3 per cent, in Cooktown subdivision 22.3 per cent), reflecting presumably the attraction of 'striking it rich' to a generally impoverished people.

By 1881, the proportion of Australian-born in the Cooktown subdivision had risen to 40 per cent (up 7 per cent from the 1876 census), with Queensland-born residents exceeding 'other Australians' by a ratio of three to one.[27] Presumably by 1881, with the lure of the goldfields having faded, many of the earlier hopefuls from New South Wales returned to their place of origin. The proportion of those born in the British Isles had similarly declined from 53.9 to 40.2 per cent. What remains unclear, against the background of falling gold production and a waning of business generally, is why the proportion of Queensland-born residents increased, both in percentage terms as a proportion of the population and in real terms from 396 persons in 1876 to 811 at the 1881 census.[28]

The Influx of Chinese

Hector Holthouse, in *River of gold,* erroneously suggests that the mass migration of Chinese to Far North Queensland from Canton and Hong Kong began with the arrival of the *Victoria* on 30 January 1875.[29] Actually,

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26 Derived from 1876 census statistics in *QVP,* 2, 1877, p. 505.

27 Figures derived from 1881 census statistics as published in *QVP,* 2, 1882, p. 975.

28 One explanation is that a number of families in Queensland may initially have been deterred from venturing to the Far North by the reports of frontier hardships, in the form of attacks by Aborigines and the general standard of health and facilities in Cooktown, as well as the pervading presence of the Chinese. By the mid to late 1870s, a number of such families might have decided to try their luck at Cooktown, on the perceived basis of improved living conditions and notwithstanding the prevailing view that 'the bubble had burst'.

29 Holthouse, *River of gold,* p. 86. In reality, the *Victoria* arrived from Sydney, *via* Brisbane and Townsville: see *CHPRA,* 3 February 1875, p. 2.

the first ships to bring Chinese from the East were the SS *Adria* and SS *Singapore,* arriving at Cooktown with a total of 754 Chinese passengers on 20 March 1875.[30] As mentioned previously, however, Chinese had been arriving in Cooktown since the early months of 1874 on ships plying along the eastern seaboard of Australia.

The SS *Boomerang,* for example, arrived in Cooktown on 7 July 1874 with 112 Chinese passengers from Brisbane and intermediate ports, leading a local newspaper to note that

> ... the Boomerang brought a considerable addition to the Chinese population.[31]

Indeed, by the end of 1874, there were an estimated 1500 Chinese at the Palmer River goldfields, most of whom would have reached there *via* Cooktown.[32] How many had established themselves as traders or market-gardeners in Cooktown by that time is not clear, although the Cooktown register sample shows six merchants, one doctor and two artisans present in 1874, suggesting that their numbers were probably at least around the twenty to thirty mark.[33]

Where exactly in Australia the first 1500 or so Chinese came from is not clear, nor is there any indication of how long they had been in Australia or what they had been doing in the interim. Given, however, that there were at least 28,000 Chinese in Australia in the early 1870s, including over 3000 in Queensland, it would be surprising if several thousand had not headed for the Palmer at their first opportunity.[34]

Over the following five years, a total of 20,832 Chinese (all males except for thirty) arrived by sea at Cooktown from Canton or Hong Kong.[35] Several thousand more, unrecorded in Cooktown immigration records,

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30 *The Cooktown Courier,* 27 March 1875, p. 2.

31 *CHPRA,* 15 July 1874, p. 3.

32 See 'population of the goldfields' return as at 31 December 1874, as published in *QVP,* 1, 1876 (statistics of the Colony for 1874), p. 8.

33 The Chinese physician, Kong Chung, arrived in mid April 1874 from Millchester: see *CHPRA,* 29 April 1874, p. 3.

34 In 1871, there were 3305 Chinese in Queensland 7220 in New South Wales and 17,795 in Victoria: see C.Y. Choi, *Chinese migration and settlement in Australia,* Sydney University Press, 1975, p. 22.

35 See successive 'immigration to Cooktown' returns as published in *QVP,* 1875-80.

probably arrived by sea from elsewhere in Queensland or New South Wales. Most of the arriving Chinese were destined for the Palmer River goldfields and usually spent only a day or so at a camping ground on the outskirts of Cooktown, being 'kitted out' with the necessary basics for alluvial mining and a load of supplies to be carried to the Palmer.[36]

The number of Chinese who became residents of Cooktown over the years between 1875 and 1885 is difficult to verify. As discussed previously in Chapter 4 under the heading 'The Fringe Dwellers', it was claimed at times that the Chinese constituted half the population of Cooktown and that by early 1877 there were some 3000 Chinese in the town.[37] Those numbers seem exaggerated, not least because it is difficult to imagine that gainful employment could have been available in Cooktown for that number of people, even in support of a goldfields population of around 15,000.

Certainly, the highest number of Chinese identified in the Cooktown register sample was forty-two in 1878, with the highest number of individual merchants being thirty-five in the same year. Even if the number of merchants had been seventy, which seems unlikely, the associated workforce would probably not have exceeded 300.[38] Added to that could have been a domestic staff of say three servants each for the wealthier half of the merchants, making another 105. On the outskirts of the town, Chinese market gardeners and their employees might have totalled 300 individuals, while another fifty might have been working as fishermen.[39] Another 100 might have been employed as water carriers, with the same number as firewood vendors. It is also possible that around 300 Chinese could have been employed as carriers and packers, although much

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36 For an excellent account of Chinese immigration to Far North Queensland during this period see K. Cronin, 'The Chinese community in Queensland, 1874-1900', *Queensland Heritage,* 8, 1978, pp. 3-13.

37 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 21 October 1876, p. 2 and 10 February 1877, p. 2.

38 Calculated on the basis that each merchant, on average, would have been unlikely to have employed more than four other Chinese. Even at the peak of the Chinese presence, there were only seventy to eighty Chinese eligible to vote in council elections, that is, rate-paying residents: see *The Cooktown Courier,* 30 January 1878, p. 3.

39 The sub-collector of customs seized all the Chinese fishing nets in 'Chinatown' and at Patrick's Point on 3 January 1878 in order to measure their mesh size: see *The Cooktown Courier,* 5 January 1878, p. 3. Although numbers were not mentioned specifically, the impression given is that only twenty or thirty individuals were involved.

of their time would have been divided between Cooktown and the Palmer.[40] And at any one time, it is possible that an additional 200-300 Chinese could have been in the town, either awaiting a ship back to China or preparing to move to the Palmer. On that basis, it seems unlikely that the Chinese population of Cooktown would have exceeded 1500 even in the peak years of 1875 to 1878.

Finally, it is worth mentioning briefly several issues in relation to the ethnic background of the Chinese in Cooktown. Kathryn Cronin, in her excellent account of the Chinese in Far North Queensland in the late nineteenth century, discusses in some detail the place of origin of most of the Chinese in Cooktown as being Kwangtung (now Guangdong) province in southern China.[41] She differentiates, for example, between those of the League of three *yik* and the League of four *yik* (or the *Sam Yap* and *Sze Yap* associations), while noting that the principal Chinese merchants belonged to the former.[42] Importantly, though, she also makes the point that the wealthy capitalists and financiers of the *Sam Yap* organisation

> ... affected a private contempt in their hatred of the rival League of four *yik* which would have been presumptuous if it had not been fully reciprocated.[43]

The point is that there were considerable rivalries within the Chinese community in Cooktown, both between the urban and provincial factions of those from Kwangtung, and between those from Kwangtung and the neighbouring province of Fukien. The Chinese community, therefore, as will be discussed later in this chapter, was rarely able or interested in presenting itself as a cohesive bloc in its dealings with the wider community. Sea Wah, for example, the longstanding owner of the Queensland Hotel, failed dismally in his attempt to gain election as an

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40 The claim in *The Cooktown Courier,* 24 September 1879, p. 2 of as many as 500 Chinese employed as packers or carriers seems exaggerated, particularly given the several reports of Chinese merchants sub-contracting the carriage of goods to European dray-team operators. See, for example, W.H. Corfield, *Reminiscences of Queensland 1862-1899,* Frater, Brisbane, 1921, p. 53 talking of 'an agreement with a Chinese storekeeper to carry for him for twelve months at the rate of £50 per ton'.

41 See Cronin, 'The Chinese community', p. 4. This province, with Hong Kong and Canton (now Guangzhou) as its port outlets, has traditionally been a source of emigrant workers to Southeast Asia, Australia and the United States.

42 She also notes, however, that 'no dialect group had a monopoly of any one occupation': Cronin, 'The Chinese community', p. 6.

43 Cronin, 'The Chinese community', pp. 4-5.

alderman in 1878 primarily because he was unable to galvanise the support of eligible Chinese voters.[44]

The second issue is that local newspapers, as they became increasingly strident in their criticism of Chinese immigration from about 1876 onwards, frequently portrayed the Chinese as low-class degenerates, riddled with diseases and intent only on plundering the wealth of Queensland. *The Cooktown Courier,* for example, asserted that many of the immigrants 'in their own country would rank as slaves',[45] while *The Cooktown Herald* propagated the rumour that

> ... a large proportion of the arrivals here are recruited from the criminal class and that, in fact, the Chinese government is making Queensland a place of banishment for its convicts.[46]

There is, needless to say, no evidence whatsoever to suggest that the Chinese arriving at Cooktown were from the criminal classes. Indeed, the overwhelming evidence is that most were agricultural labourers (peasants) from provincial agrarian villages, with a lesser number of semi-skilled, more urbanised workers from Canton and its surrounding districts.[47] There is also no evidence to suggest that the Chinese Government was in any way involved in the passage of its citizens to Australia. Indeed, the official policy of the Ching Dynasty towards emigration had long been one of prohibition. It was only in 1860, under pressure from Western demands for Chinese labour to assist in the development of the colonies, that the Peking Convention made it legal for the recruitment of labourers in treaty ports.[48]

It also seems probable that very few of the Chinese who flooded into Far North Queensland between 1875 and 1877 were 'slaves' as such, although a number of the domestic servants of wealthier merchants, for example, could well have been. The majority, however, were certainly

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44 An earlier editorial in *The Cooktown Courier,* 30 January 1878, p. 3 decried the possibility that 'Chinese voters ... will most likely exercise a marked influence on the result'.

45 *The Cooktown Courier,* 15 March 1876, p. 2.

46 *CHPRA,* 16 May 1877, p. 2.

47 See, for example, Cronin, 'The Chinese community', pp. 4 and 8.

48 See Choi, *Chinese migration,* pp. 14-5.

indentured labourers, whose passage to Cooktown had been paid by a Chinese financier or merchant, either in Canton, Hong Kong or Cooktown.[49] The confusion between slaves and indentured labourers, at least in the minds of the white community in Cooktown, may have arisen over the fact that under Chinese law

> [s]laves and all other menials form a distinct class ... with only this difference between them, that the former are involuntary and permanent members of it, while the latter are voluntary and temporary. Both are *Tsien,* mean or servile, as opposed to *Liang,* the respectable and free citizen.[50]

Age, Sex and Marital Status of the Community

As indicated earlier at Table 5.7 (see page 209), data on 'age' was amongst the least available information within the Cooktown sample register, a situation exacerbated by the under-representation of women and children. Fortunately, very good data on age distribution is available in the 1876 and 1881 census returns, notwithstanding that the Cooktown subdivision included the relatively small settlements of Laura and Normanby River — which were probably closer in their age/sex structure to the Palmer River than Cooktown.[51]

Accepting, though, the subdivision statistics as reasonably representative of Cooktown itself, Figure 5.4 (on next page), shows — not unexpectedly for a 'frontier' community — that Cooktown and its environs had a markedly higher proportion of adults in the 25-44 age bracket than the Queensland average, and a markedly lower proportion of children.

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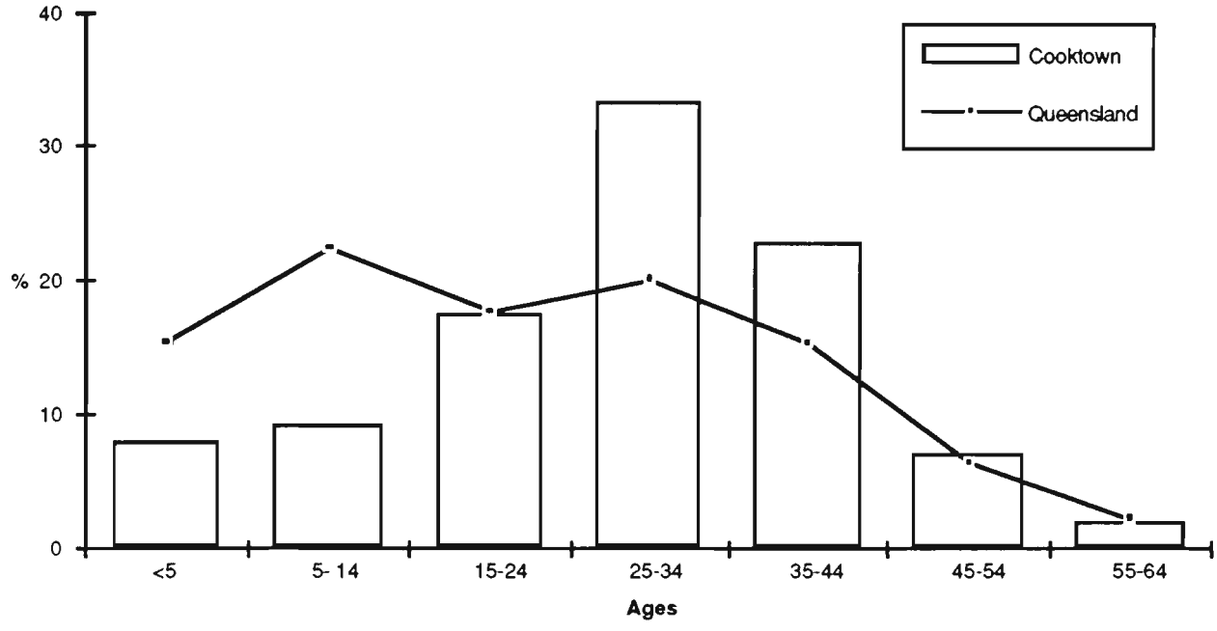
49 See the discussion in Cronin, 'The Chinese community', pp. 7-8, including mention that 'most of the contracting ... for the Queensland goldfields seemed to be in the hands of a 'coalition' firm in Cooktown, called *Hopkee'.*

50 See G. Jamieson, *Chinese family and commercial law,* Vetch and Lee, Hong Kong, 1970, p. 139.

51 At the 1876 census, the combined population of Laura and Normanby River was 151 persons: see *QVP,* 2, 1877, p. 456.

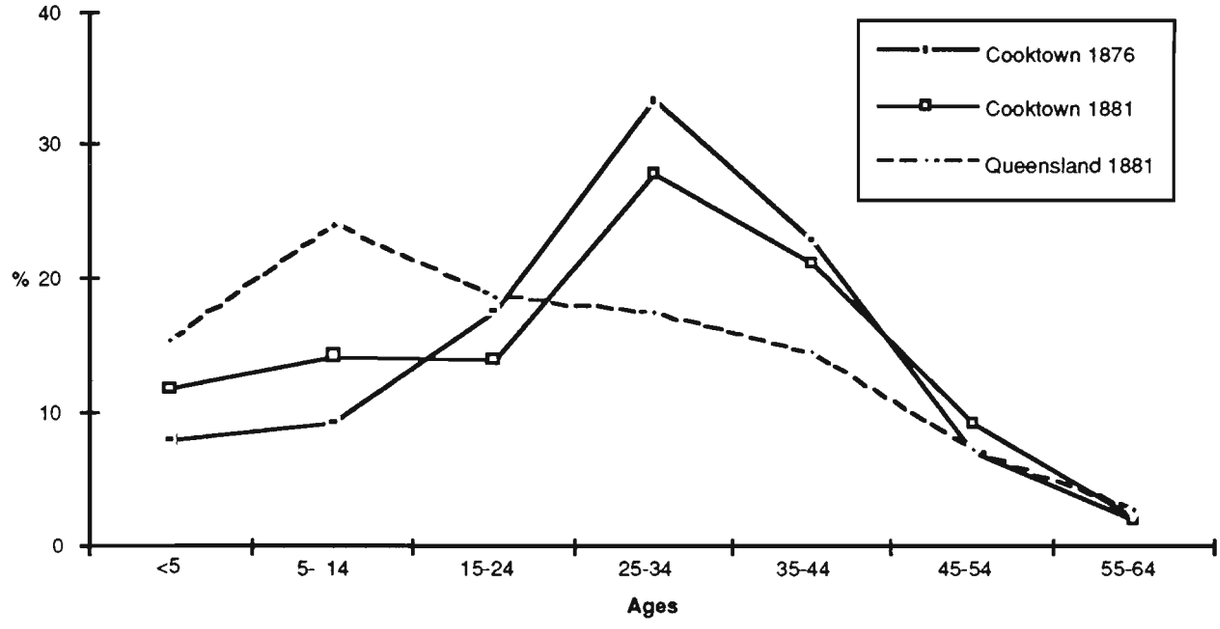
Figure 5.4 - Comparative Age Distributions - Cooktown subdivision and Queensland in 1876
(excluding adults 65 years and over)



Source: Census statistics in *QVP*, 2, 1877, p. 353.

By 1881, as can be seen at Figure 5.5 (on next page), the Cooktown subdivision was still atypical of Queensland. The proportion of the population in the 25-44 age bracket had, however, declined from 50.9 to 41.6 per cent (against the Queensland average of 36.1 per cent), while the proportion of children under fifteen conversely had increased from 17.1 to 26.0 per cent (against the Queensland average of 39.4 per cent).

Figure 5.5 - The Changing Age Distribution in Cooktown subdivision 1876-1881
(showing also the Queensland-wide distribution in 1881)



Sources: Census statistics in *QVP*, 2, 1877, p. 353 and *QVP*, 2, 1882, pp. 913 and 1132-3.

What Figures 5.4 and 5.5 do not show, of course, is the substantial gender imbalance in the Cooktown subdivision, particularly in the early years of settlement. Anecdotal accounts suggest that the population of Cooktown in its first year or so was almost exclusively male, with the only females being a handful of wives, the occasional storekeeper or publican, and a smattering of barmaids and prostitutes.[52] Even at the census of 1876, by which time Cooktown and its adjoining settlements had been underway for over two years, the proportion of males to females in the subdivision was in the ratio 76:24, compared to the Queensland average of 60:40.[53]

Moreover, in the 20-45 age bracket, as can be seen at Table 5.12 (on next page), the ratio was more often greater than 80:20.

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52 As mentioned previously, Holthouse's assertion that Cooktown had 'ninety-four licensed hotels, with as many brothels' is unfounded: Holthouse, *River of gold,* p. 141.

53 Calculated from the census statistics in *QVP*, 2, 1877, p. 353. As at late May 1875, the only Chinese female in Cooktown was the recently-arrived wife of the merchant Wing On, who had himself arrived earlier from Millchester: *The Cooktown Courier,* 22 May 1875, p. 2.

Table 5.12 - The Ratio of Males to Females in the Cooktown subdivision in 1876

Age Bracket (years)	Cooktown subdivision (% of males)	Queensland (% of males)
20-24	73.3	63.1
25-29	79.1	65.3
30-34	83.8	71.8
35-39	89.8	70.0
40-44	84.6	71.3

Source: Census statistics in *QVP*, 2, 1877, p. 353.

By the census of 1881, the Cooktown subdivision ratio had fallen to around 67:33, an improvement of some nine percentage points since 1876 but still almost 10 per cent higher than the Queensland average.[54]

A number of adult males in Far North Queensland at that time were, of course, married men who had left their wives and families in the south (or in China), while they tried their luck at the Palmer. Others would have proceeded alone on the basis of bringing their families to Cooktown once they themselves were established. In 1876, for example, as shown at Table 5.13, married men unaccompanied by their families constituted 28 per cent of all European males in the Cook district (which encompassed the Palmer and Hodgkinson goldfields, as well as the Cooktown subdivision).[55] By 1881, the figure had fallen to 23 per cent.

Table 5.13 - Marital Status of European Males in the Cook District 1876-1881
(by percentage of total male population)

	1876	1881
Never married	60.8	63.6
Married accompanied	11.2	13.4
Married unaccompanied	28.0	23.0
Total married	39.2	36.4
Married Queensland-wide	27.1	24.0

Sources: Census statistics in *QVP*, 2, 1877, pp. 353 and 437 and *QVP*, 2, 1882, pp. 913 and 974.

54 Calculations derived from census statistics in *QVP*, 2, 1882, pp. 913 and 1132-3.
55 Such statistics were not compiled for the Chinese population of the district.

The sociological implications for Cooktown of having such an atypical community in terms of age structure, gender and marital status would have been considerable. The preponderance of single or unaccompanied male adults, as discussed earlier in Chapter 4, meant that the focus of Cooktown's early business community was on meeting the service needs of a large number of often temporarily-accommodated residents and transients en route to the Palmer. Much of the town's early business structure, therefore, came to be based around an extravagant jumble of small stores, dining rooms, hotels, stables, billiard saloons and boarding houses, few of which had any prospect of surviving once the flow of Europeans to the Palmer petered out.

The male-dominated society of the early town was undoubtedly also more boisterous and less law-abiding than its southern counterparts. In the absence of a sizeable body of children, there would have been less community interest in education and health, and facilities for the entertainment of families. The scarcity of women, in a familial context, would have abetted the transience of the population and stymied the development of a sense of neighbourhood and community spirit. Although the number of mixed marriages cannot readily be ascertained, it does seem that community social values became sufficiently ambivalent that a small number of European women (some albeit of doubtful repute) married Chinese men.[56]

Occupations within the Community

The final element to be discussed under community structure is the occupations of those resident between 1873 and 1885. As shown at Table 5.7 (at p. 209), data on occupation was available for almost half the individuals listed in the Cooktown sample register which, together with the census statistics of 1876 and 1881, has enabled some useful analysis of the workforce, in particular. The main dilemma, from an analytical perspective,

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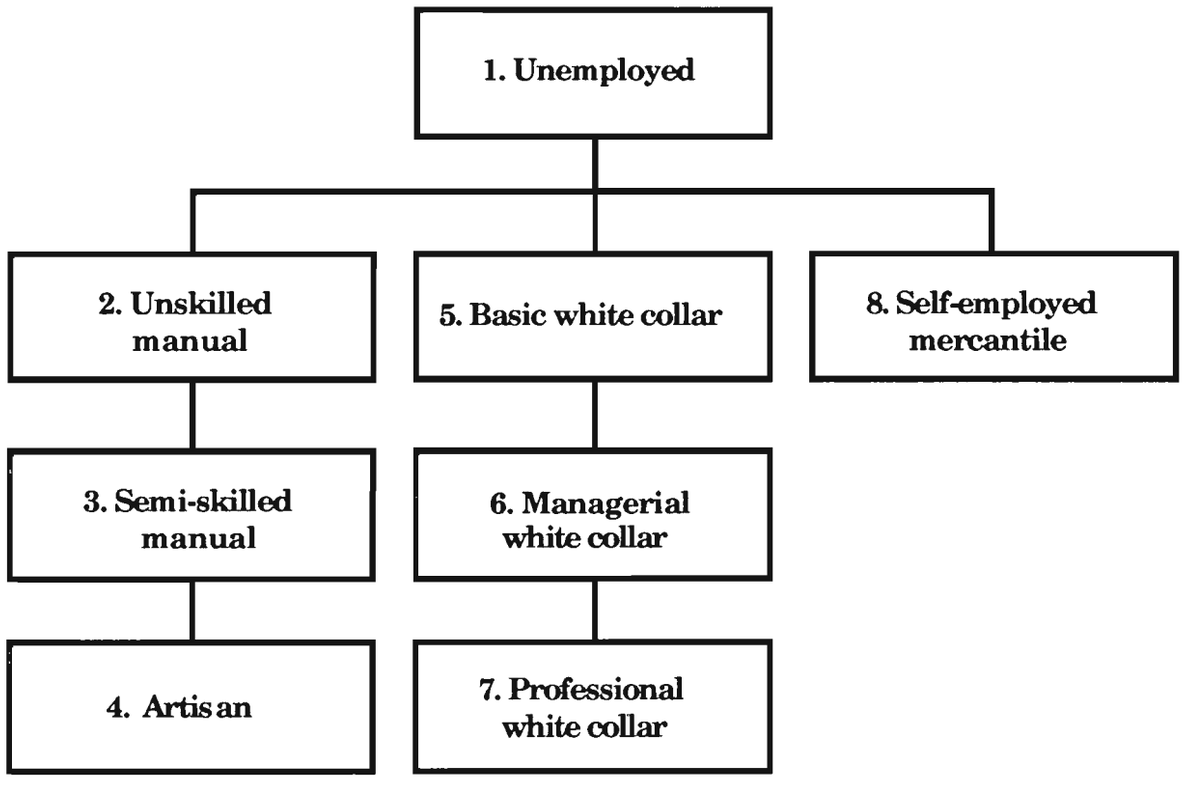
56 Ah Chan, for example, took out a prohibition order on publicans against the supply of alcohol to his wife, Mary Ann: see *The Cooktown Courier,* 24 July 1875, p. 2. *The Cooktown Courier,* 16 January 1878, p. 2 similarly noted that 'Sarah Jane Lawson, a female of exceedingly bad character, preferred a change of assault against Ah Foo, the Chinaman with whom she lives ... [but the charge was] not proceeded with as she was drunk and unruly'. The impression from anecdotal accounts is that the number of European women married to or living with Chinese men at any one time was probably around ten.

has been in grouping the various occupations so that they not only reflected contemporary values, but also facilitated some meaningful comparisons with occupational data in the 1876 and 1881 census statistics.

The eventual approach taken, shown at Figure 5.6, was firstly to separate completely the groupings for Europeans and Chinese, on the basis that they were two quite separate workforces and business communities. The various occupations were then grouped, as shown previously at Table 5.5 (at p. 207), into eight categories (broadly corresponding to those used in the 1876 and 1881 census returns) which could in turn be considered as three separate streams, namely manual, white-collar and mercantile.

Figure 5.6 - Occupational Groupings used in the Cooktown Sample Register



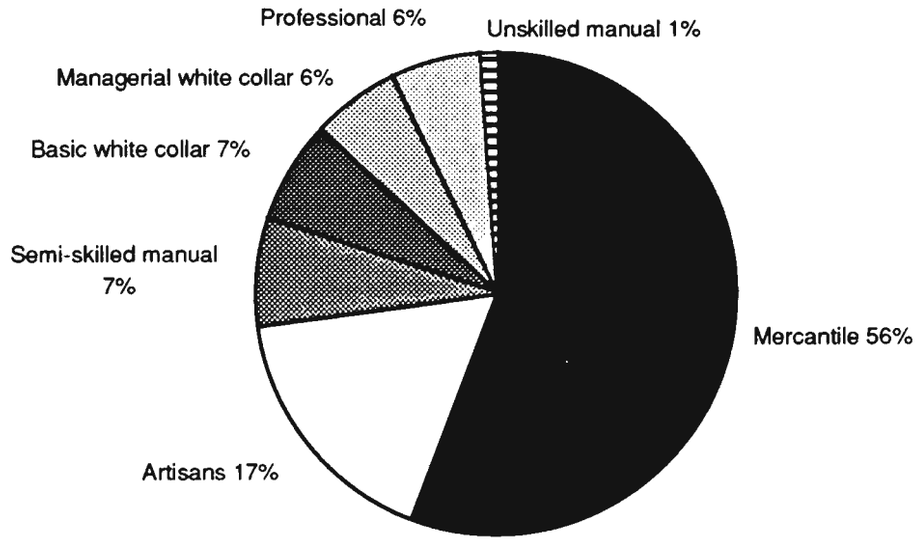
Note: Separate structures were used for the European and Chinese communities.

The perceived advantage of this approach is that while a vertical hierarchy of occupations can be seen to exist within the streams, the horizontal hierarchy between streams is purposely less clear. The issue, does not arise, therefore, as to whether a well-established artisan is of a higher occupational status than a merchant employing three people, or a newly-arrived accountant. Indeed, it is only in terms of an analysis of

occupational mobility (which was attempted in the sample register) that the need then arises to consider whether a move from one stream to another would have been seen at the time as a forward or backward step.

From the sample register, as shown at Figure 5.7, it can be seen that (for the European community) the largest proportion of the workforce was in the self-employed mercantile category (storekeepers, grocers, publicans, carriers, auctioneers etc), followed at a distant second by artisans (blacksmiths, bakers, saddlers, carpenters, tentmakers, bootmakers etc), with unskilled manual workers almost non-existent.[57]

Figure 5.7 - Occupational Structure of the European Workforce in Cooktown 1873-1885
(by percentage of the workforce, not population)



Source: Calculations derived from Cooktown sample register.

In the years between 1874 and 1877, however, as can be seen at Table 5.14 (on next page), the proportion of self-employed merchants and the like was even higher, constituting close to two-thirds of the workforce in the town.

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57 Almost every able-bodied unskilled worker was, of course, at the goldfields in the early years of Cooktown, which created an acute labour shortage in the town. A number of editorials in *The Cooktown Herald* in late 1875, for example, called upon the Government to ensure that a share of the incoming immigrants to Queensland were apportioned to Cooktown, especially female domestic servants: see *CHPRA,* 25 September 1875, p. 2 and 6 November 1875, p. 2.

Table 5.14 - Occupational Structure of the European Workforce in Cooktown 1874-1877
(by percentage of the workforce, not population)

	Semi-skilled Manual	Artisan	Basic white collar	Managerial white collar	Professional	Mercantile
1874	4.3	14.5	6.9	3.7	5.9	64.7
1875	6.7	19.4	5.4	4.1	5.4	59.0
1876	3.6	14.1	6.1	6.4	6.7	63.1
1877	5.5	17.2	4.7	6.6	6.6	59.4

Note: Figures for unskilled manual workers not included as their numbers were consistently less than one per cent.

Source: Calculations derived from Cooktown sample register.

Obviously, it is accepted that the Cooktown register sample may be biased towards the town's merchants, because of their greater public exposure and hence more frequent recording in newspapers and petitions, for example. Table 5.15, however, shows that the calculations from the register sample are broadly supported by the 1876 and 1881 census statistics for the Cooktown subdivision. The other interesting trend from Table 5.15 is that as the proportion of merchants in the Cooktown subdivision declined over the period, the workforce elsewhere in Queensland was shifting quite rapidly from a preponderance of skilled and semi-skilled manual workers to a more even balance with those engaged in commerce and transport.

Table 5.15 - Comparative Structure of the Cooktown and Queensland workforces in 1876 and 1881
(by percentage of the workforce, not population)

	Semi-skilled and artisans	White collar	Professional	Mercantile
1876				
Cooktown register sample	17.7	12.5	6.8	63.0
Cooktown subdivision	24.1	15.1	4.0	56.8
Queensland	55.8	14.6	3.5	26.1
1881				
Cooktown register sample	26.4	13.6	5.4	54.6
Cooktown subdivision	27.7	15.9	4.0	52.4
Queensland	40.3	15.5	6.9	37.3

Note: Figures for unskilled manual workers for Cooktown subdivision and Queensland purposely excluded for comparative purposes.

Sources: Calculations for Cooktown subdivision and Queensland derived from census statistics as published in *QVP*, 2, 1877, pp. 353 and 421, and *QVP*, 2, 1882, pp. 913 and 975.

Anecdotal evidence similarly supports the contention that the European workforce of Cooktown comprised an overabundance of self-employed and small-scale merchants and other service providers.[58] Yet the town had no industries, such as metal fabrication, coach or wagon building, or shipbuilding.[59] It also had no processing plants, such as sawmilling or tanneries, or in support of the various fisheries industries operating in northern waters.[60] There was also no concerted effort made to develop Cooktown as the nodal point, in terms of tertiary services, for either Far North Queensland or adjacent areas of Papua New Guinea or further afield in the Southwest Pacific.[61] In essence, Cooktown in the 1870s was largely a collection of shops.

Overlaying (or underlying) the European business community, especially in the years 1875 to 1878, was that of the Chinese.[62] According to the Cooktown sample register, the majority of Chinese were either storekeepers or market-gardeners. Indeed, the only exceptions in the register were two Chinese publicans, two physicians and a small number of carriers, artisans, fishermen, laundrymen and cooks.[63] Moreover, Figure 5.8 (on next page), shows that in the peak years 1877-78 the Chinese

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58 See, for example, the editorial in *CHPRA*, 7 November 1874, p. 2 noting that 'already there are more stores than the business of the town warrants'.

59 The failure of Cooktown to diversify from its narrow role of a service centre for the Palmer is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6 'Small Town in a Large Colony'. Note, however, that the Chinese in Cooktown constructed at least two junks for employment by them in the Torres Strait fisheries: see *The Cooktown Courier*, 2 March 1878, p. 3.

60 Cooktown was the home port, though, for some thirteen boats and 450 men employed in the *bêche-de-mer* industry in the late 1870s: see G.C. Bolton, *A thousand miles away: a history of Queensland to 1920*, Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1963, p. 76.

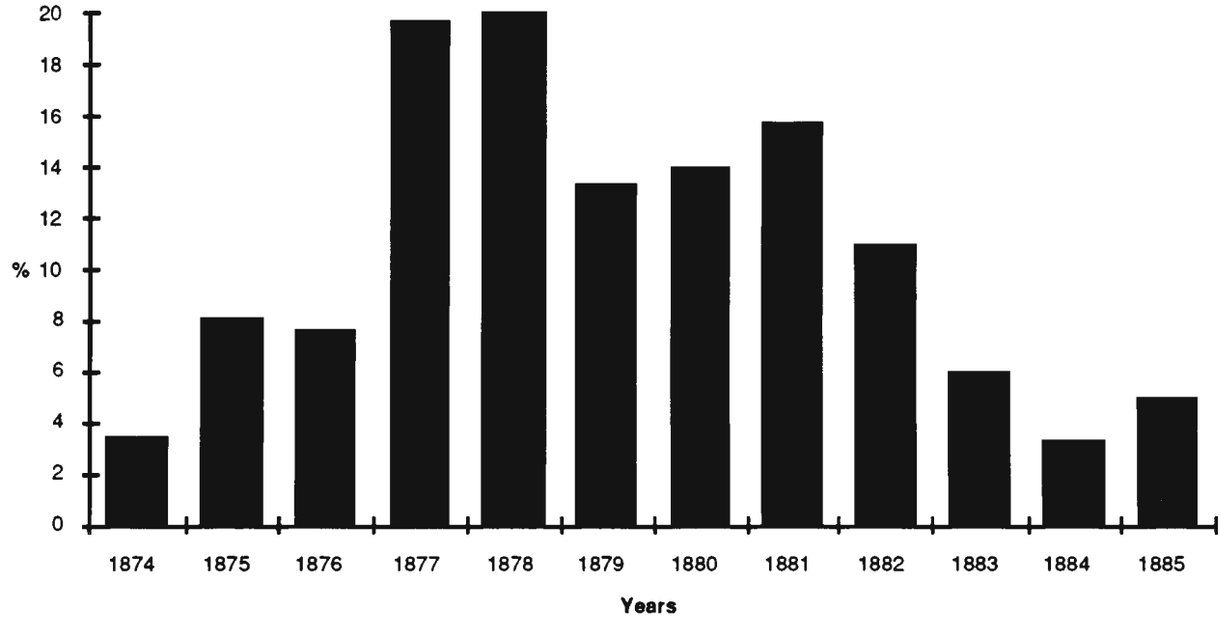
61 Burns Philp, for example, chose Thursday Island rather than Cooktown as its base in the late 1870s for the extension of its interest into the pearlshelling industry of Torres Strait and trade to the New Guinea coast and into the South Pacific: see K. Buckley and K. Klugman, *The history of Burns Philp*, Burns Philp, Sydney, 1981, p. 52.

62 It will be recalled from Chapter 4 that the twelve or so major Chinese traders may well each have had an annual turnover of around £12,000 in the peak years 1876-78: see footnote 64 to Chapter 4 on page 233.

63 The discussion earlier in this chapter suggested that the Chinese workforce comprised 5% merchants, 20% mercantile assistants, 70% domestic servants, 20% market-gardeners, 3% fishermen, 7% water-carriers, 7% firewood-vendors and 16% carriers/packers.

constituted around 20 per cent of those directly engaged in mercantile occupations in the town. In reality, given the under-representation of Chinese in the sample, the proportions in the years 1874-79 were probably at least five to ten percentage points higher. Significantly also, Figure 5.8 shows that by about 1884 the Chinese business community had largely quit the town.

Figure 5.8 - The Proportion of Chinese in Mercantile Occupations in Cooktown 1873-1885



Source: Calculations derived from the Cooktown sample register.

As for the other elements already discussed, the atypical composition of Cooktown's early workforce would also have impacted on community development, including probably the engendering of somewhat ambivalent views as to the subordination of civic interests to commercial imperatives. Rather than prolonging that discussion at this point, it would seem more useful now to examine community lifestyle in the formative years of Cooktown, against the background of community structure as discussed to date.

Health and Mortality

Life in Cooktown in the 1870s was certainly not for the faint-hearted or those of feeble constitution. A number of residents died from sunstroke.[64] At least six women and children drowned, while another woman was taken by a crocodile after a boating mishap.[65] A young boy died within three minutes of being stung by jelly fish as he swam within metres of the main wharf.[66] Two-metre brown snakes, 'as thick as a man's arm', were often found in backyards and outbuildings,[67] while rats frequently reached almost plague proportions with reports of them

> ... infesting houses and eating food off the dining room table while the family were clearing away the plates.[68]

In addition to such 'natural' hardships, the people of the town suffered badly from attacks of dysentery and malaria, periodic epidemics of measles, isolated cases of typhus and leprosy, and the threat of smallpox being introduced *via* Chinese immigrants.[69] In the month of April 1874 alone, twelve people were also committed to the lunatic asylum at Rockhampton, 'due mainly to intemperance'.[70] Table 5.16 (on next page), summarising cases treated at the Cooktown hospital during October 1875,

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64 Editorials in the local newspapers routinely exhorted men working in the sun to wear a hat: see, for example, *The Cooktown Courier,* 19 January 1876, p. 2. It was noticeable, though, that many residents - and particularly new comers - persisted in wearing clothes more suited to an English autumn.

65 See *CHPRA,* 19 August 1874, p. 4 and *The Cooktown Courier,* 31 October 1874, p. 2 and 12 November 1879, p. 2. There were numerous sightings over the years of a 5-6 metre crocodile resident near the river mouth: see, for example, *The Cooktown Courier,* 27 September 1876, p. 2. Large sharks were also often caught near the main wharf: see, for example, *CHPRA,* 9 January 1875, p. 2 reporting the catching of a five-metre shark.

66 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 8 January 1879, p. 3.

67 See, for example, *CHPRA,* 25 August 1875, p. 2 reporting the killing of a two-metre brown snake behind the Customs building. Carpet snakes, frequently in excess of 230 cm, were also common: see, for example, *CHPRA,* 10 October 1874, p. 2.

68 *The Cooktown Courier,* 5 July 1876, p. 3. More exaggerated reports, typically written by the correspondent to *The Townsville Times,* claimed that 'rats run up and down the streets and have ... taken complete possession of the town': see *The Cooktown Courier,* 22 January 1876, p. 3.

69 The first suspected case of smallpox occurred on the SS *Mecca,* which arrived at Cooktown in late December 1876. The captain voluntarily agreed to quarantine the ship and its passengers on the north shore of the Endeavour River for twenty-seven days: see *The Cooktown Courier,* 10 January 1877, p. 3.

70 *CHPRA,* 6 May 1874, p. 3. See also the report that 'Hannah Beseley died ... from excessive drinking': *The Cooktown Courier,* 6 February 1875, p. 3.

shows the prevalence of fever-related illnesses (and, by today's standards, some rather strange medical diagnoses).

Table 5.16 - Summary of Cases Treated at Cooktown Hospital in October 1875

17 intermittent fever	1 rheumatic fever
6 dysentery	1 constipation
3 poverty of blood	1 inflammation of the brain
2 indigestion	1 congestion of the lungs
2 typhus fever	1 heat disease
1 famine fever	1 bronchitis

Source: *CHPRA,* 3 November 1875, p. 2.

The prevalence of fever and the general ill-health of the community, particularly during the wet season, gave credibility to the popular viewpoint that the tropical areas of northern Australia were unsuited to European habitation.[71] Certainly, it was widely accepted that

> ... even if he could drag out an existence for a score of years ...[the white settler] could not work and more especially, could by no means perform manual labour.[72]

Conventional wisdom, couched loosely around Darwin's theory of the adaptability of species to an environment, also held that the effects on Europeans of the tropical climate would be irreversible by the third generation.[73] In the interim, according to the contemporary view, the white settler

> ... could not multiply there unless he fathered a coloured brood; and that if he did produce

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71 These views held sway, even in medical circles, until the early twentieth century: see, for example, the discussion in P. Courtenay, 'The white man and the Australian tropics: a review of some opinions and prejudices of the pre-war years' in *Lectures in North Queensland History,* 2nd series, James Cook University of North Queensland, Townsville, 1975, p. 59.

72 As quoted by R.W. Cilento, 'The white settlement of tropical Australia' in P.D. Phillips and G.L. Wood (eds.), *The peopling of Australia,* Dawsons, London, 1968, pp. 229-30.

73 See the discussion in L.H. Harloe, 'White man in tropical Australia', BA (Hons) thesis, James Cook University, Townsville, 1987, pp. 15-6.

> any white children they would be sickly, frail and sterile.[74]

In reality, of course, living in Cooktown in the 1870s was probably no more injurious to one's health than living at the time in Brisbane or Sydney (with the risk of malaria probably counter-balanced by the likelihood of contracting typhus or bubonic plague, for example, in the south).[75]

In the climate of contemporary opinion, however, it was widely considered essential for men, women and children to spend at least several weeks each year in the south, with 'a change of air to brace up their systems again'.[76] The local police inspector, for example, Thomas Clohesy, went south in February 1876 'to improve his shattered health', and was ordered by doctors to spend three months on leave in northern Victoria or Tasmania and on no account to return to northern Queensland.[77] It was also not uncommon for the local newspapers in Cooktown to report, almost on a weekly basis, another merchant 'selling up and going south in consequence of bad health'.[78]

Interestingly, though, both Cooktown newspapers, from about November 1875 onwards, railed constantly against any suggestion that the town was an inherently unhealthy place to live. In part, they were simply countering the 'propaganda' from their rivals in Townsville, who delighted in publishing rumours that 'two-thirds [of the population of Cooktown] are sick with ... fever'.[79] Largely, however, it was because both newspapers had come to the view — presumably through their exposure to lessons from overseas — that the problem more correctly related to the 'want of pure

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74 Cilento, 'The white settlement', p. 230.

75 Brisbane had periodic outbreaks of typhoid fever in the 1870s and 1880s: see M. Cannon, *Australia in the Victorian age: life in the cities*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1988, pp. 155-6 and the photograph opposite p. 154 showing 'some of the thousands of rats killed in Sydney slums after outbreak of bubonic plague'. It should also be remembered that many of the 'natural' hardships in Cooktown, such as crocodiles, snakes and stingers, are an integral part of living anywhere in North Queensland, even today.

76 See the editorial in *CHPRA*, 22 December 1875, p. 4 noting the departure for the south by the SS *Leichhardt* of 'a great many ... who were judging by their looks in great want [of recuperation]'.

77 See *CHPRA*, 26 February 1876, p. 2. For those suffering from malaria, it may well have been that a further attack could have proved fatal.

78 See, for example, the reported departures in *The Cooktown Courier*, 26 June 1875, p. 3 and 22 December 1875, p. 2.

79 See, for example, the response in *The Cooktown Courier*, 22 January 1876, p. 3.

water and the total absence of drainage' in the town.[80] An editorial in *The Cooktown Courier,* for example, asserted that

> ... to an unprejudiced mind it seems monstrous that, because a person is sick, the only chance for recovery is a journey south. We have many times before this ... endeavoured to impress upon [our readers that the solution lies in] ... healthy sanitation ... and a never failing water supply.[81]

In the event, as was discussed in Chapter 4 under the heading 'Public Works', Cooktown's municipal council took steps in 1877 to eliminate the open sewer adjacent to the wharf area. A town water supply, however, did not eventuate until the late 1880s. In the interim, the 'Rose Swimming and Shower Baths' offered enclosed bathing facilities in the Endeavour River 'free from alligators, snakes and fish' at 3s 6d per week.[82] Chemists and druggists also offered a variety of quaint (and quackish) remedies, such as *Elliott's Champagne Quinine Wine* (for malaria, diarrhoea and rheumatism) and *Rose's Phosphodyne* (for a range of afflictions including fever, defective memory and impotency).[83]

The undoubted improvement in the standard of health and sanitation in Cooktown in the first decade or so of settlement is difficult to quantify. Infant mortality rates were not compiled, while the raw statistics for births, deaths and marriages for the Cooktown subdivision provide little scope for meaningful analysis. The fact, for example, that the total number of deaths recorded in Cooktown between 1874 and 1876 was three times the number of births is unexceptional, given that miners and others from the Palmer River goldfields typically comprised around 90 per cent of patients admitted to the Cooktown hospital.[84] The fact that the annual birth rate

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80 See, for example, the editorial in *CHPRA,* 13 November 1875, p. 2.

81 *The Cooktown Courier,* 24 November 1875, p. 2.

82 See the advertisement in *The Cooktown Courier,* 10 October 1874, p. 2. Cannon asserts that by the 1880s, colonial bathing habits had completely broken away from the English example, partly because of the hotter climate but also because of easy access to beaches and rivers: see Cannon, *Life in the Cities,* pp. 163-5.

83 See the advertisements in *CHPRA,* 11 August 1875, p. 3 and 18 August 1875, p. 4.

84 Deaths totalled 436; births 140: see birth and death statistics in *QVP,* 1875-77. An editorial in *The Cooktown Courier,* 30 September 1876, p. 3 claimed that only 2 per cent of current hospital patients were from the town, while the hospital annual report for 1876 stated that Cooktown residents comprised only twenty-seven of the 327 admissions for the year: *CHPRA,* 17 January 1877, p. 2.

from 1877 onwards was relatively low and that the total number of births closely proximated the annual number of deaths are similarly unexceptional and probably reflected both the dearth of young married females and an adult population of relatively young average age.

Education in the Town

The somewhat inauspicious start to the government-funded primary school, with a six-month delay in construction and vague accusations of the embezzlement of subscriptions, was discussed in some detail in Chapter 4 under the heading 'Government Buildings'. When the school opened in January 1875 with eighty students of both sexes, the principal noted that 'the attainments of the children are very low'.[85] He also estimated that at least another 120 children of school age (between eight and thirteen years) were living within two miles of the school but had not been enrolled.[86]

Over the years to 1884, annual enrolments fluctuated from a high of 324 in 1878 to a low of 212 in 1881.[87] Average daily attendances were uniformly high and often better than 90 per cent, which was an impressive record considering that the legislative requirement was only that children between the ages of six and twelve years had to attend sixty days each half year.[88] The daily attendance average for boys was marginally better than that for girls, presumably reflecting the greater priority given by parents to the education of boys and the reality that girls were probably required occasionally to stay at home and care for younger children in the absence or illness of their mother.[89]

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85 See *CHPRA,* 27 January 1875, p. 2. A number of the children, of course, would have had no formal schooling in 1874.

86 Judging from the school statistics of 214 children for the first term of 1874, it would seem that most of the 120 subsequently enrolled: see Queensland Department of Instruction, *Annual Return for School No. 177 Cooktown State 1877,* EDU/AB 177, QSA.

87 Figures derived from successive enrolment returns: see Queensland Department of Instruction, *Annual Returns for School No. 177 Cooktown State 1877-84,* EDU/AB177, QSA. In 1885, a separate school was commenced for girls and infants.

88 As discussed in *The Cooktown Courier,* 12 January 1876, p. 2. Somewhat inexplicably, the visiting school inspector in both April and October 1877 noted in his reports that 'attendance very irregular': see *QVP,* 1, 1877, p. 1116.

89 The average daily attendances for boys and girls across the years 1877-84 were 81.3 and 77.8 per cent respectively: calculated from the *Annual Returns 1877-1884,* EDU/AB 177, QSA.

Almost all the children were Europeans, with no indication from the available records that a single Aboriginal child was enrolled across the period. There were, however, seven Chinese boys enrolled in 1875 (at least), who the Principal described as 'among the very aptest and quickest' and whose progress had been 'extraordinarily rapid'.[90] The subjects taught at the school included reading, writing, grammar and analysis, mental arithmetic, geography, etymology, Latin and Green roots, Latin and French phrases, and map drawing, with each school year concluding in a public examination of students by the headmaster.[91]

It is evident, though, that not all parents in Cooktown were satisfied with the public school system. In 1874, before the opening of the government primary school, eighty-six students had been enrolled at the two day schools run privately by a Mr Livingstone and Mrs Siebold (the latter charged 1s 6d per week for a 'large' child and one shilling for a 'small' child).[92] Once the government school opened, the number of children attending private schools declined to thirty in 1875, but then rose again to nearly sixty in 1877.[93] The break-up of student numbers at the various private schools is not recorded, but in 1875 the latter included Mrs Deakin O'Reilly's day and boarding school, and Mesdames Rowland and Hartley's school for young ladies, which offered 'French, music, drawing and all branches of thorough English education'.[94] In 1877, Mr O'Brien's 'evening school for young men' offered the standard subjects of a classical education, including French, Greek and Latin.[95]

While the social background of children attending the private schools is not recorded, it would seem obvious to expect that their parents were well-to-do citizens of the town or district. There is similarly no indication in the available source material of the educational opportunities (or lack thereof) open to the children of Cooktown beyond primary school. It

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90 See *CHPRA,* 10 November 1875, p. 2.

91 See, for example, the report in *The Cooktown Courier,* 16 December 1876, p. 3.

92 See their respective advertisements in *The Cooktown Courier,* 8 August 1874, p. 2 and 22 August 1874, p. 2. The attendance taken from school statistics in *QVP,* 2, 1876, p. 358.

93 See the statistics in *QVP,* 2, 1876, p. 686 and 1, 1878, pp. 1018-9.

94 See the advertisements in *The Cooktown Courier,* 24 November 1875, p. 2 and 27 November 1875, p. 2. Mrs O'Reilly's advertisement hailed that she was a member of the French Academy of Music.

95 See the advertisement in *The Cooktown Courier,* 15 August 1877, p. 2.

is presumed that the options for secondary education at that time were limited to boarding school attendance in Rockhampton or Brisbane, or perhaps Charters Towers. Finally, it is interesting to note — as a reflection of contemporary social values — that the Cooktown committee agitating (successfully) for the establishment of a separate state school for girls, argued in 1882 in a letter to the Secretary for Public Instruction that

> ... mixed schools where [children] are not even taught by one of their own sex ... are objectionable in any part of the colony, how much more is the objection intensified when applied to the far north of Queensland.[96]

The Other Civic Institutions

The relatively-quick progress made by the town in the construction of three churches, a masonic lodge and a school of arts building was discussed in some detail in Chapter 4 under 'special-interest' buildings. While it is not intended to repeat that discussion, several additional observations can be made about the institutions of Cooktown in the context of community lifestyle. The first is that religious observance did not play a major part in the lifestyle of early Cooktown. Many of the small storekeepers and artisans, for example, traded seven days a week in the early months of the settlement.[97] Indeed, it was not until about 1876 that the Sabbath came generally to be observed as a non-working day and, even in late 1877, a Chinese hawker trading on a Sunday received only a caution from the local magistrate.[98]

Certainly, Church of England and Presbyterian services were conducted by laymen on a reasonably regular basis (sometimes combined) from early 1874.[99] But attendances rarely exceeded 100 people and neither

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96 Letter from James Dick, Secretary of the Cooktown Girls School Committee, to the Secretary for Public Instruction, 5 May 1882, EDU 637, QSA. It would appear that previous requests had been turned down on the grounds that a minimum of 200 girls were needed before consideration would be given to a separate school. Cooktown at the time of Dick's letter had only 95 girls enrolled.

97 See, for example, the editorial in *The Cooktown Courier,* 16 January 1878, p. 3 noting that 'for a long time business was so very brisk ... that the entire seven days of the week hardly sufficed to transact our business'.

98 See *CHPRA,* 26 September 1877, p. 2.

99 See the account of a Church of England meeting 'for the purposes of forming a church' in *CHPRA,* 20 May 1874, p. 3.

faith was able to secure the services of a resident clergyman in the first year of settlement.[100] There is no record of Roman Catholic services being conducted prior to the arrival of Father MacGuinness in November 1874, fully a year after the first settlers.[101] Even though his services were subsequently well attended, anecdotal accounts suggest that Catholics in Cooktown were in the minority.[102] Indeed, census data shows that around 22 per cent of Cooktown's population in 1876 was Irish-born (see Figure 5.3 at page 217).

The seeming apathy of the Cooktown community towards religious observance is not easily explained. In part, it obviously reflected the absence of resident clergymen (which in itself is somewhat inexplicable). It also seems probable that for many of the early settlers, in the absence of the usual framework of familial and societal expectations, religious observance had temporarily at least become subordinated to more material considerations.

It also seems that several of the other civic institutions in early Cooktown, while established with impressive speed and objectives, were in fact barely viable in terms of their membership and wider community support. Numerous early meetings of the hospital committee, for example, lapsed for want of a quorum.[103] A meeting called by the headmaster of the primary school in July 1876, to elect a school committee of seven, attracted only one Chinese and seven European parents from a school parent population of 147 couples.[104]

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100 The first permanent Church of England minister arrived in February 1875: see *CHPRA,* 24 February 1875, p. 2. Presbyterian services were at that time still being conducted by visiting ministers: see *The Cooktown Courier,* 23 January 1875, p. 2. For the record, the first Church of England minister was Reverend Tripp, who died shortly after his arrival in May 1874, having been 'severely indisposed' for the duration of his short stay: *CHPRA,* 15 July 1874, p. 2.

101 See the report of his arrival in *CHPRA,* 25 November 1874, p. 2.

102 Of the first eighty students enrolled in the primary school in 1875, for example, sixty eight were Church of England, ten were Roman Catholic and two were Presbyterian: see *CHPRA,* 27 January 1875, p. 2.

103 See, for example, *The Cooktown Courier,* 8 May 1874, p. 2. At the elections for the hospital committee in January 1877, *The Cooktown Courier,* 23 January 1878, p. 3 similarly noted that 'there was some difficulty in making up the full number ... as many of those first proposed declined to act'.

104 The seven Europeans and several others not present were elected to the committee, while the lone Chinese parent was pointedly overlooked: see *The Cooktown Courier,* 5 July 1876, p. 2.

The Cooktown School of Arts, which opened in February 1876 with the aim of providing a library and reading room for interested subscribers, was similarly supported by only a small proportion of the community.[105] Nine of its twenty-four committee meetings in 1877 lapsed for want of a quorum, while its annual report tabled in January 1878 noted that

> ... the affairs of the Institution [have] continued in a very languishing state which can ... be accounted for by the many changes that [have taken] place among the residents.[106]

The Catholic Church's St Marys Mutual Improvement Society, which conducted monthly debates on such topical subjects as 'are women eligible for the leading public professions of the colony?' and 'are women entitled to equal political privileges with men?', reduced its subscription fees for 1878 from twenty shillings to ten in a bid to bolster its flagging membership beyond thirty-four.[107]

The local chapter of the masonic lodge, which held its first meeting in May 1874, similarly failed to hold or broaden its membership over the following three years, with the masonic hall falling into disuse and disrepair by 1878.[108] The point being made is that many of Cooktown's early institutions — with the partial exception of the churches — were not widely supported by the community. Indeed, their membership — or at least their leadership — was typically drawn from a narrow and well-to-do stratum of society, which usually seemed more interested in replicating the perceived accoutrements of 'civilised society' than in meeting the more basic needs of the community-at-large. That is not to suggest, of course, that Cooktown was probably any different in that regard from most other emerging towns in Queensland. In Cooktown's case, however, the inability of its institutions to galvanise public support was yet another factor working against the concept of community.

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105 Its inaugural meeting, for example, attracted only 20-30 persons: see *The Cooktown Courier,* 24 July 1875, p. 2.

106 As published in *The Cooktown Courier,* 12 January 1878, p. 3.

107 See its annual report in *The Cooktown Courier,* 19 January 1878, p. 3.

108 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 5 October 1878, p. 2.

Entertainment 1870s-style

Holthouse's account of early Cooktown in *River of gold* leaves one with the clear impression that the main leisure preoccupations of men in the town were drinking, gambling and the frequenting of dance halls and brothels. That image of Cooktown, as an Australian version of the American 'Wild West', may have existed in the minds of many European miners at the Palmer, whose isolation and arduous lifestyle may understandably have made them rather desperate for entertainment and the mere sight of a white woman. As discussed in Chapter 4, however, the number of entertainment-seeking transients in Cooktown on any one day across the peak years 1874 to 1877 probably rarely exceeded 200.[109] Moreover, not all the transients and only a small proportion of the single or unaccompanied male residents of the town would have frequented the hotels and 'night spots' of the town on a regular basis.

That is not to understate, of course, the role of hotels, billiard rooms and dance halls as forms of entertainment in early Cooktown. What they constituted, though, was the very visible and very profitable component of the entertainment *industry* of Cooktown, which had little to do with the leisure pursuits of the majority of residents. Indeed, the focus of the residents tended to be on more mundane activities such as race meetings, regattas, cricket matches and performances by visiting troupes.

The local jockey club, for example, held its first meeting on 20 May 1874 (the same day that elders of the Church of England were meeting to discuss the formation of a church).[110] Initially, an improvised race-course was established some eight kilometres south of the town on the northern banks of the Annan River, although its distance from town was obviously seen as a deterrent to spectator attendance.[111] By August, a new venue had been located within three kilometres of the town, on the southern banks of the Endeavour River, which *The Cooktown Herald* described as

> ... a fine oval course with but little clearing required, a splendid straight of 350 yards

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109 Based on the estimate at Figure 4.2 (see p. 150) that the daily *average* peaked at 138 in 1875.

110 See *CHPRA,* 20 May 1874, p. 2.

111 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 4 July 1874, p. 3.

> and ... pleasant shady places for [sic]
> picnicing.[112]

Even before the opening of the new course, though, Cooktown was gripped 'with a racing mania'.[113] Almost weekly, small crowds gathered to witness and wager substantial sums on two-horse races, either at the Annan track or along the Palmer road, with the principals putting up sums ranging from £20 to £100 a side.[114] The first meeting at the new course, held on a Tuesday, comprised six events with a total prize money of £100 and reportedly drew a crowd of 500 spectators.[115]

Over the following four or so years, race meetings went from strength to strength. In July 1875, for example, a two-day progam comprised thirteen races with total prize money of £450, while gate-takings and nomination fees for the Easter meeting in 1876 totalled £793.[116] Interestingly, meetings from late 1875 onwards included a growing number of Chinese, who it was noted 'were not above entering into the monetary mysteries [of betting]'.[117] Certainly, in the case of the Chinese, it is and was convenient to attribute their interest in horse-racing to the gambling aspects of the sport.

Less easy to ascribe are the motives of the Europeans. Cynics, and church leaders in Cooktown who saw race meetings regularly drawing crowds several times the size of their congregations, would no doubt have contended that the chief attraction to Europeans was also the gambling aspects of the sport, a situation compounded by the relative affluence of the community and the 'easy-come easy-go' attitude of many Palmer miners. *The Cooktown Herald,* though, saw far nobler motives, asserting that horse-

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112 *CHPRA,* 23 September 1874, p. 2. By 1877, with the expansion of the town, the race committee needed approval to retain their site: see Cooktown Jockey Club Committee to Secretary of Lands Department, in-letter 5348/77 of 1877, LAN/A54, QSA.

113 See the report in *The Cooktown Courier,* 12 September 1874, p. 2.

114 See, for example, *The Cooktown Courier,* 12 September 1874, p. 2.

115 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 17 October 1874, p. 3 and *CHPRA,* 21 October 1874, p. 2.

116 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 21 July 1875, p. 3 and *CHPRA,* 1 April 1876, p. 2.

117 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 18 March 1876, p. 2. The Christmas meeting in 1878 included a special event 'for hacks the bona fide property of and to be ridden by Chinese, twice around the course': see the advertisement in *The Cooktown Courier,* 20 November 1878, p. 2.

racing — like cricket and athletics — epitomised the transfer of English values and traditions to a new community, noting that

> ... in all English communities, that of sport
> shines pre-eminent ... [and] we are glad that
> even here in the north beneath a tropical sun
> men are found true to their national instincts.[118]

Clearly, that sentiment applied to the Cooktown cricket club, which played its first match in early July 1874.[119] The condition of the ground, described as 'only lately cleared [and] a little rough causing the ball to fly in unpleasant proximity to the batsman's face', may have contributed in the second game played to the rather dismal first innings scores of all out for 16 and 5 respectively.[120] It seems, however, that cricket in Cooktown never achieved a popular following and, indeed, remained the preserve of an English public school-type minority.[121]

Similarly, the several annual regattas, conducted on occasions such as the Prince of Wales' birthday and New Years Day, and typically including sailing, sculling and punt races, usually featured as the key participants the same well-to-do minority.[122] That presumably — as in the case of cricket — was because only those with an English public school-type background had the skills necessary to participate. Without belabouring the point too far, the same privileged minority — while ostensibly working for the good of the community — in practical terms also excluded 'the masses' from most other forms of entertainment they organised by the cost of admission. The one guinea entrance fee to the Fire Brigade Ball on New Year's Eve in 1877, for example, would effectively have limited attendance to the same socially-homogeneous minority.[123]

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118 Editorial in *CHPRA,* 24 June 1874, p. 3.

119 See the report in *The Cooktown Courier,* 11 July 1874, p. 3. Only fourteen members turned out for the game, however, barely enough to put two batsmen, two umpires and a fielding side onto the ground.

120 See the reports in *The Cooktown Courier,* 11 July 1874, p. 3 and 18 July 1874, p. 3.

121 Those playing in the match between 'the banks and civil service versus the mercantiles' in February 1879, for example, were largely the influential and well-to-do citizens of the town: see *The Cooktown Courier,* 8 February 1879, p. 2.

122 See, for example, the reports in *The Cooktown Courier,* 9 May 1874, p. 2 and 4 December 1875, p. 3.

123 See the advertisement in *The Cooktown Courier,* 23 December 1877, p. 3. The other inhibiting factor, of course would have been the dress requirements.

Indeed, for the bulk of the Cooktown community, the only organised leisure activities - apart from race-going - seem to have been their occasional attendance at carnivals and performances by visiting troupes. Over 500 residents, for example, reportedly attended the carnival in November 1877, organised by the committee of the Fire Brigade to celebrate the Prince of Wales' birthday.[124] Admission was one shilling for adults, children being admitted free, with advertised activities including a procession, children's and men's sports (but nothing for women), target shooting, swings, fireworks, quoits, a lottery and tents available for picnic parties.[125]

The performances of entertainers and troupes, who visited Cooktown as part of their tour schedule to north Queensland, were typically very well attended. Noteworthy in 1874 alone were Albertini the magician, who charged two shillings for front seats and one shilling for back seats at his performances at the Leichhardt Hotel in May 1874;[126] the Lingard Star Combination Troupe, a group of ventriloquists and vocalists, who visited en route from Cardwell in October 1874;[127] and the Great Variety Troupe, which included Miss Carry Dearlove dancing and singing, and Fred Loyola's 'daring feats on the trapeze', in late November 1874.[128]

Finally, it should be said that very little is recorded of the entertainment activities of the Chinese community in Cooktown, apart from their supposed preoccupation with gambling. Editorials in the local newspapers, particularly from about 1877 onwards, periodically denounced the prevalence of Chinese gambling houses in the town, with claims that individuals were occasionally losing as much as £200 in a single night of fantan.[129] How many such establishments were supposedly operating at any one time, and the number of patrons attracted to them, is not recorded. *The Cooktown Courier* also implied more than once that local police were being paid to turn a blind eye to Chinese gambling.[130] The other possibility,

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124 See the report in *The Cooktown Courier,* 10 November 1877, p. 3.
125 See the advertisement in *The Cooktown Courier,* 31 October 1877, p. 2.
126 See his advertisements in *The Cooktown Courier,* 9 May 1874, p. 2.
127 See the advertisement in *CHPRA,* 21 October 1874, p. 2.
128 See the advertisement in *The Cooktown Courier,* 28 November 1874, p. 2.
129 See, for example, *The Cooktown Courier,* 21 February 1877, p. 2 and *CHPRA,* 19 September 1877, p. 2.
130 See, for example, the editorial in *The Cooktown Courier,* 21 February 1877, p. 2.

not mutually exclusive of the first, is that the authorities tolerated the situation on the basis of the 'devil they knew'.[131]

Law and Order in Early Cooktown

Certainly, some accounts of the early days of the town imply that law and order was almost non-existent. Holthouse in *River of gold,* for example, asserts that

> [not] a day passed without the mud of Charlotte Street being churned up by struggling bodies locked in deadly combat ... [while] drunken diggers were robbed in the streets in broad daylight.[132]

Others similarly claimed that

> [all] the scum of Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane were gathered here, thieves, pickpockets, card-sharpers and loafers of every description.[133]

There is little evidence, however, either in contemporary newspaper accounts or in the statistics from the local court of petty sessions to suggest that Cooktown was crime ridden to the extent intimated by Holthouse or that offenders were not being brought to justice. There are, for example, very few editorial comments in the local newspapers of early Cooktown on the issue of law and order nor any suggestion that it was unsafe to venture onto the streets by day or by night. The *only* reference found for the year 1874 related to a series of violent arguments between certain female residents of the town, whose 'language ... would shock the ears of a Dover fish-fag'.[134] Moreover, *The Cooktown Courier* specifically reported that the St Patrick's Day race meeting in March 1875 had 'not a fight or drunken man to be seen'.[135]

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131 The police did, however, make periodic raids on Chinese gambling dens. The chief offender after one such raid was sentenced to three months imprisonment in the Rockhampton gaol: see *The Cooktown Courier,* 21 April 1877, p. 3.

132 Holthouse, *River of gold,* pp. 55-6.

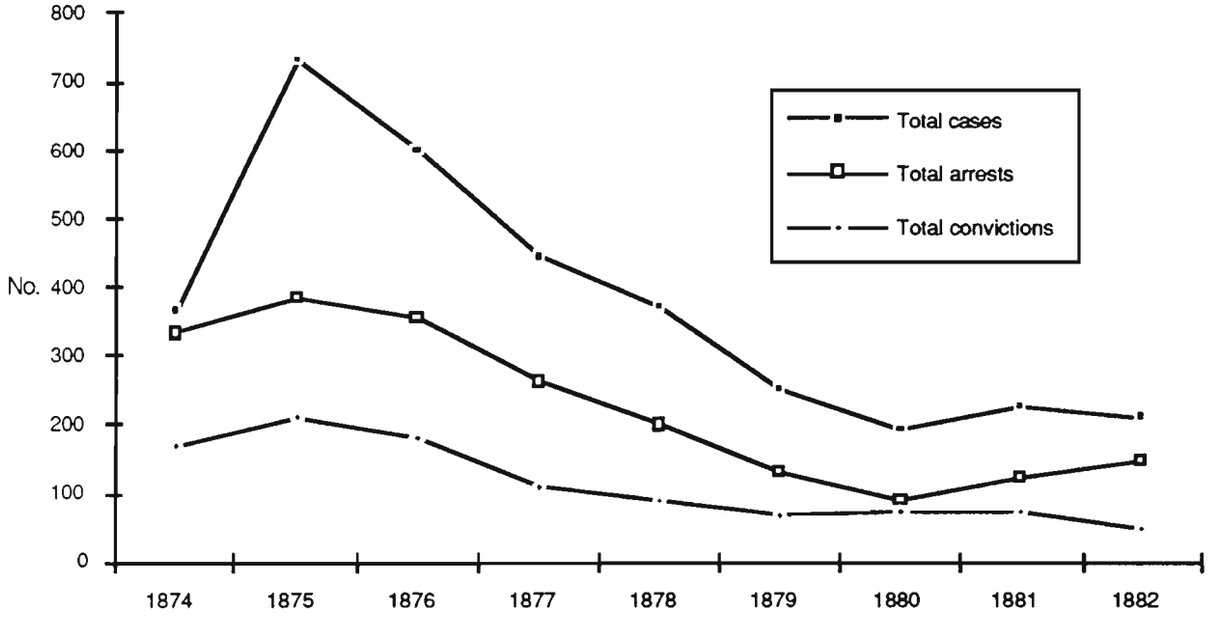
133 George Pugh quoted in A. Musgrave, 'The history of the Cooktown district' in *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society,* 40, 4, March 1955, p. 235.

134 *CHPRA,* 16 September 1874, p. 2.

135 Editorial in *The Cooktown Courier,* 20 March 1875, p. 3.

Statistics of criminal proceedings and cases before the local magistrates court for the period 1874-82, as shown at Figure 5.9 (below), also indicate that almost half the cases brought before the court were the result of summons action, rather than arrest, suggesting that the offences involved posed no particular threat to peace and good order (and probably involved residents rather than transients). The statistics also show that the conviction rate was generally only around 30 per cent, suggesting perhaps that magistrates were not overly-concerned with the level of crime in the town.

Figure 5.9 - Summary of Criminal Proceedings in Cooktown 1874-1882



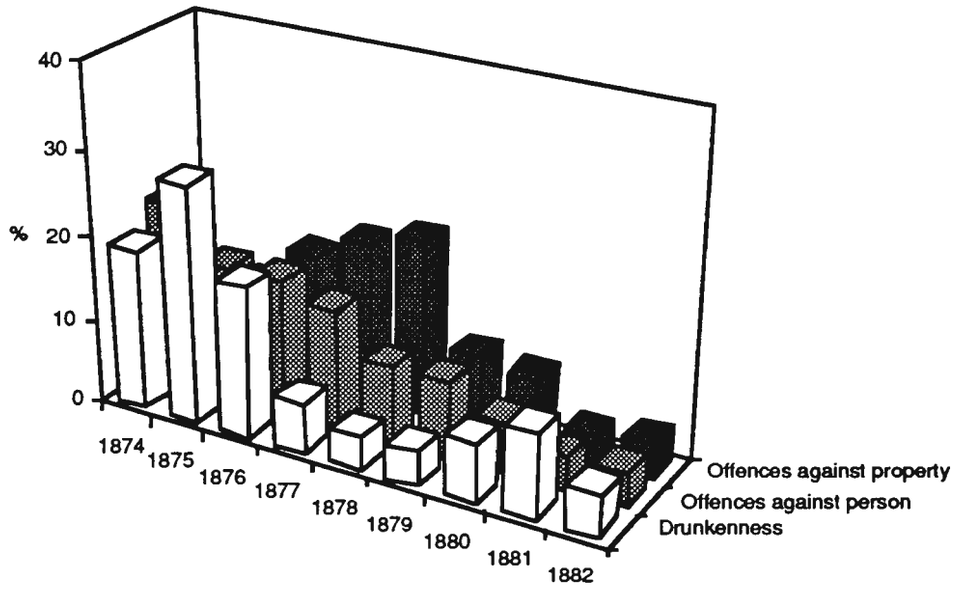
Note: The range has purposely been limited to 1882. After that date, the increasing presence of Aborigines in the town (and their arrest and conviction for relatively minor offences) skews the results quite disproportionately.

Source: Statistics taken from criminal proceedings returns in successive issues of *QVP*, 1875-83.

It is obvious from Figure 5.9 that the peak years in terms of criminal proceedings were 1874-78, which in itself is unsurprising. Figure 5.10 (on next page) shows that within those peak years, however, the most common convictions in 1874, 1875 and 1876 were for drunkenness and offences against the person (most usually assault). That presumably was a

reflection of the somewhat boisterous nature of a frontier society where disagreements were often settled by resort to physical violence.[136] By 1877, though, the number of convictions for both drunkenness and offences against the person were proportionately in decline, reflecting the growing maturity of the community and the lesser number of Europeans by then on the Palmer. Across the years 1876 to 1878, however, the number of convictions for offences against property (stealing, embezzlement, misappropriation) rose sharply, presumably reflecting the more materialistic basis of the community in Cooktown.

Figure 5.10 - Summary of Convictions in Court of Petty Sessions Cooktown 1874-1882



Note: The proportions shown are the percentages horizontally, that is, each segment represents the convictions for that year as a percentage of the total convictions for that offence across the years 1874-1882. The reason for calculating the proportions horizontally is that it then enables meaningful analysis across the period.

Source: Figures calculated by the author on the basis of statistics taken from criminal proceedings returns in successive issues of *QVP*, 1875-83.

It is also interesting to look at the penalties handed down by the courts, as a reflection of contemporary community values. On that basis, Table 5.17 (on next page) shows a selection of the penalties imposed by the magistrates' court in Cooktown between 1874 and 1877. While it is by no

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136 Although it is largely beyond the scope of this study, it is possible — where the records exist — to use the example of court cases to illustrate particular aspects of society: see, for example, C.T. Stannage, *The people of Perth: a social history of Western Australia's capital city,* Perth City Council, Perth, 1979 and R. Silerman, *Law and urban growth: civil litigation in Boston trial courts 1880-1900,* Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1981.

means comprehensive, it shows that drunkenness was regarded as the least serious offence, with stealing the most serious of the cases before the court (obviously murder, manslaughter and rape would have been treated even more seriously). Noteworthy also are the penalties imposed on Chinese for opium smuggling and keeping a gambling house.

Table 5.17 - An Example of Penalties Imposed by the Magistrates' Court Cooktown 1874-1877

Offence	Penalty
drunkenness (first offence)	5s
allowing pigs to stray into main street	5s
disposing of dead horse within town limits	5s
drunkenness (second offence)	10s
participate in illegal gambling (Chinese)	10s
using indecent language (European)	20s or 3 days imprisonment
furious riding in main street	£2
using obscene language (Chinese)	£2 or 7 days imprisonment
assault	£5 or 14 days imprisonment
selling liquor without a licence	£15
smuggling opium	£50 or 6 months imprisonment
indecent exposure	7 days with hard labour
keeping a gambling house (Chinese)	3 months imprisonment
stealing (2 bags of rice) (Chinese)	6 months with hard labour
stealing (watch and chain) (Chinese)	12 months with hard labour
unlawful possession (2 horses) (European)	12 months imprisonment
stealing (one horse) (European)	2 years with hard labour

Source: Derived from court reports in *The Cooktown Courier* and *CHPRA*, 1874-1877.

Despite the sometimes harsher penalties imposed on Chinese offenders, it does seem that the Chinese community in Cooktown was reasonably well protected by the police and courts. In September 1875, for example, a European charged with stealing a horse from a Chinese market-gardener was sentenced to two years gaol with hard labour.[137] *The Cooktown Courier* in February 1876 also noted that a Chinese man assaulted in the town for no apparent reason by a European 'ran away and

137 See the report in *The Cooktown Courier,* 25 September 1875, p. 3.

showed [his cut hand] to Mr St George [the Police Magistrate]', suggesting that the Chinese community had reasonable faith in him at least.[138] From mid 1877 onwards, Chinese offenders appearing before the criminal assizes of the North Queensland circuit court also had the option of a jury comprising six Europeans and six Chinese.[139]

Community Interest in Civic Affairs

Against that background of community lifestyle, and the earlier discussion of community structure, it now seems appropriate to address briefly community dynamics, that is, the extent of interest and involvement by the community in civic affairs and the occupational background of community leaders.

The Cooktown sample register, it will be recalled from Table 5.7 (at page 209), provided some useful statistics on 'civic involvement', based on the number of residents who held civic office in the town or were members of a variety of committees. Indeed, Figure 5.11 (over) shows that around fifty such residents participated in some form of civic involvement each year between 1874 and 1879.[140]

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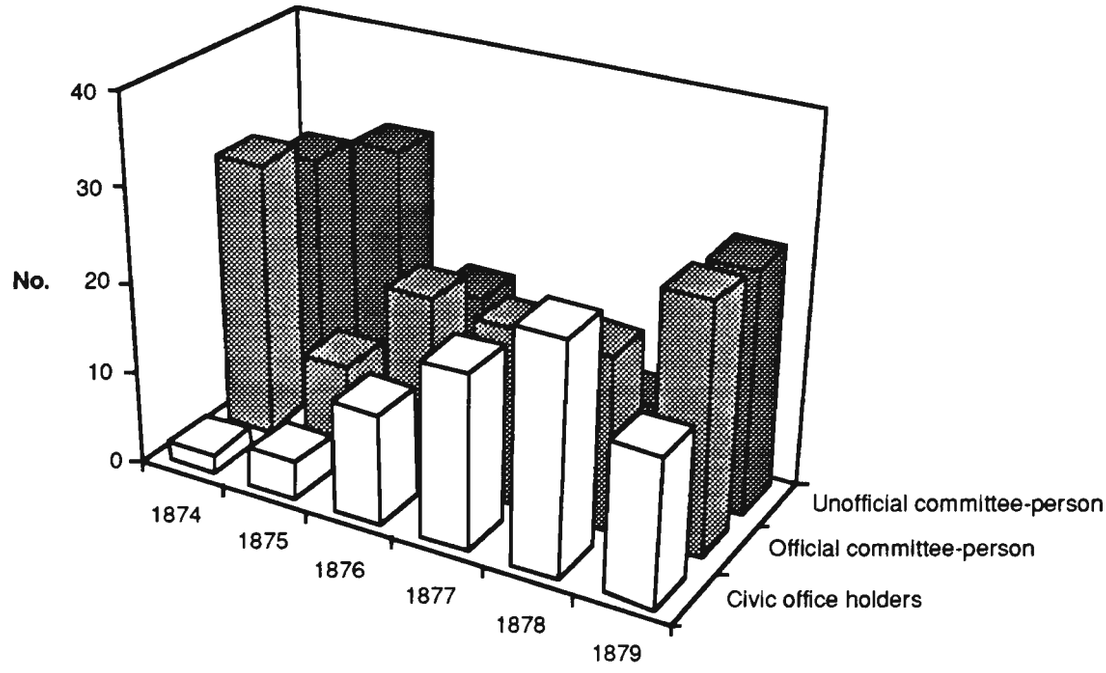
138 *The Cooktown Courier,* 19 February 1876, p. 3. There is also considerable evidence to show that the Chinese business community used the civil jurisdiction to settle commercial disputes and recover goods or moneys: see, for example, *The Cooktown Courier,* 15 March 1876, p. 2.

139 See *CHPRA,* 6 June 1877, p. 2.

140 Data thereafter was less comprehensive mainly because of the dearth of newspaper records, which typically provided most of the details in the earlier years between 1874-79. Other indices, based on a wider array of sources, are less affected by the unavailability of local newspaper records after 1879.

Figure 5.11 - Summary of Residents Involved in Civic Affairs in Cooktown 1874-1879
(showing actual number per year)



Note: A number of individuals were involved in several committees, as well as holding a civic appointment. The low figures for civic office holders in 1874 and 1875 are because Cooktown did not have a municipal council until 1876.

Source: Data derived from the Cooktown sample register.

Superficially, at least, Figure 5.11 would seem to suggest that the total number of citizens involved in civic affairs in the town grew steadily, albeit somewhat unevenly, across the period. Moreover, the listing of committees, operating in Cooktown at some time across the period 1874-79 shown at Table 5.18 (over) would broadly seem to confirm that Cooktown acquired a typical range of community-based organisations within its first five years.

Table 5.18 - The Committees in Cooktown 1874-1879
(not all were necessarily in operation across the period)

Official	Unofficial
hospital	jockey club
primary school	cricket club
cemetery	masonic lodge
fire brigade	progress association
school of arts	temperance society
volunteer corps	licensed victuallers
	chamber of commerce
	carriers association
	railway league
	amateur histrionics club
	prospecting association

Source: Primarily derived from *The Cooktown Courier* and *CHPRA*, 1874-1879.

In fact, the sub-totals at Figure 5.11 (on previous page) reflect the far more complex reality of a town whose early civic affairs were often a shambles. In 1874, for example, Figure 5.11 shows a reasonable number of residents involved in both official and unofficial committees; there were, however, only two office holders — the police magistrate and one justice of the peace — in a community of around 2000. The 1875 figures show the addition of two more justices (and reflect a changeover of magistrates). By that time, though, public disillusionment with the affairs of the town saw the number of residents involved in official committee work decline from thirty to ten (as reflected in the second row of Figure 5.11).

By far the worst years, however, were 1876 to 1878. The front row of Figure 5.11 reflects the increase in civic office holders from 1876 onwards to a bottom line of around twelve, reflecting the creation of an aldermanic body of seven, together with a judiciary of one magistrate and about four justices. In 1877 and 1878, however, it can be seen (again from the front row of Figure 5.11) that the turnover of such office holders took the total number of individuals holding civic office during each year to over twenty. At the same time, as can be seen from the rear row of Figure 5.11, public interest in unofficial committee work declined from thirty-six people in 1875 to only nine in both 1877 and 1878.

Indeed, of the years illustrated at Figure 5.11, the most 'normal' or most desirable in terms of civic affairs is 1879. There, the number of office holders had fallen to sixteen reflecting a turnover of only four of the twelve incumbents. A broad range of residents had also become involved in official committee work, while public interest in unofficial committee work had similarly increased from nine to twenty-six persons. By 1879, though, as will be discussed shortly, much of the damage from the earlier years was almost irreversible.

The obvious question is what caused the unfortunate situation of 1875 to 1878? The first reason, as discussed in previous contexts, is that the community seemed largely indifferent to civic matters, despite the best efforts of both local newspapers to galvanise public interest in the affairs of the town. *The Cooktown Courier,* for example, in an editorial of June 1874 railed that

> ... we feel bound to remonstrate against the apathy and want of public spirit displayed by the people of Cooktown in regard to matters affecting their interests.[141]

The Cooktown Herald, in the lead-up to the first elections for aldermen in June 1876, similarly noted that 'very little signs of interest are manifest'.[142]

The second reason would seem to relate simply to the transient nature of the population. As discussed earlier in this chapter the population turnover across the years 1875 to 1879 was often in excess of 50 per cent annually. Compounding the problem was the fact that even those remaining often left the town for weeks on end, to pursue business opportunities elsewhere or to recuperate in the south. In 1877, for example, three sitting aldermen 'temporarily' left Cooktown for several months, to set up new businesses elsewhere in Far North Queensland, throwing the affairs of the municipal council heavily onto those remaining (who all then had to attend every meeting to ensure a quorum).[143]

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141 *The Cooktown Courier,* 20 June 1874, p. 3.

142 *CHPRA,* 17 May 1876, p. 2.

143 See the editorial comment in *The Cooktown Courier,* 28 July 1877, p. 3.

The third reason, and probably the most significant, is that Cooktown across the years 1875 to 1878 was wracked by several intense personality clashes. The mildest of them centred on those involved in the administration of the hospital. At least two medical superintendents resigned over allegations of mismanagement; another was sacked for allegedly embezzling fees, while the secretary in 1875 stood accused of misappropriating stores.[144] The situation was such that by early 1876 an editorial in *The Cooktown Courier* noted that

> ... it seems to be almost chronic now that the annual meeting of the Hospital subscribers should be the scene of ... [such] recriminations.[145]

Problems at the hospital, however, never led to the depths of rivalry as occurred between the senior management of *The Cooktown Courier* and *The Cooktown Herald.*[146] Their problems started when an employee of *The Courier* attempted to sabotage the print-run of *The Herald* by pouring paste over typeset, claiming in the subsequent court action that it was done as a practical joke.[147] Over the subsequent months and years, their rivalry intensified both in editorial attacks on each other and in actual fisticuffs.[148] The climax occurred in March 1876 when an alleged agent of one up-ended a bucket of excrement over the other in the main street.[149]

Even their clashes, however, paled into relative insignificance compared to the bitter dispute between Clay Brooks, the town clerk, and William Simpson, an aspiring and eventual alderman. Over the space of three years, Simpson appeared in court no less than eight times, either as the accused or plaintiff in cases of assault or abusive language involving Brooks or his associates, with convictions being recorded against him on

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144 See, for example, reports in *CHPRA,* 10 February 1875, p. 2 and 2 October 1875, p. 3.

145 *The Cooktown Courier,* 26 January 1876, p. 2.

146 More correctly, the rivalry was between W. Bailey, the owner/editor of *The Cooktown Herald* and W.P. Morgan, town solicitor and lessee of *The Cooktown Courier.*

147 In the event, the offender was only reprimanded: see *CHPRA,* 25 November 1874, p. 2.

148 See the report in *CHPRA,* 23 February 1876, p. 2 of Bailey and Morgan engaging in 'a quarter hour of public fisticuffs'.

149 The offender was sentenced to eighteen months gaol: *CHPRA,* 15 March 1876, p. 2.

four occasions.[150] Once Simpson was elected to the council in February 1877, his verbal attacks on Brooks (and anyone who sided with him) were so disruptive that the council effectively ceased to function. After one particularly fiery meeting, *The Cooktown Herald* reported that

> ... the scene enacted [at the recent council meeting] was the most disgraceful it has ever been our lot to chronicle or to witness. [The ongoing ruction between] ... Simpson and Clay Brooks ... will tend to the entire destruction of the usefulness of the municipal institution in Cooktown.[151]

When Simpson eventually left Cooktown in July 1877, 'one alderman cracked two bottles of champagne to celebrate'.[152] Simpson's possible vindication was that Brooks was sacked in late 1877 and a year later, as shop assistant in Cooktown, was sentenced to three months gaol for stealing a roll of fabric.[153] The tragedy of their intense rivalry was that

> ... intelligent and capable men will [be so disheartened by their behaviour that they will] shrink from undertaking municipal duties.[154]

Certainly, statistics from the Cooktown sample register, as shown at Figure 5.12 (on next page), indicate that a surprising number of individuals retired completely from public life from about 1878 onwards. For a number of them, it must be presumed that their disinclination to serve further, either on the council or within an official committee, related to disenchantment. It probably can also be safely assumed that at least

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150 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 15 September 1875, p. 3 and 25 October 1876, p. 3 and *CHPRA,* 10 January 1877, p. 2 and 28 March 1877, p. 2.

151 *CHPRA,* 17 March 1877, p. 2.

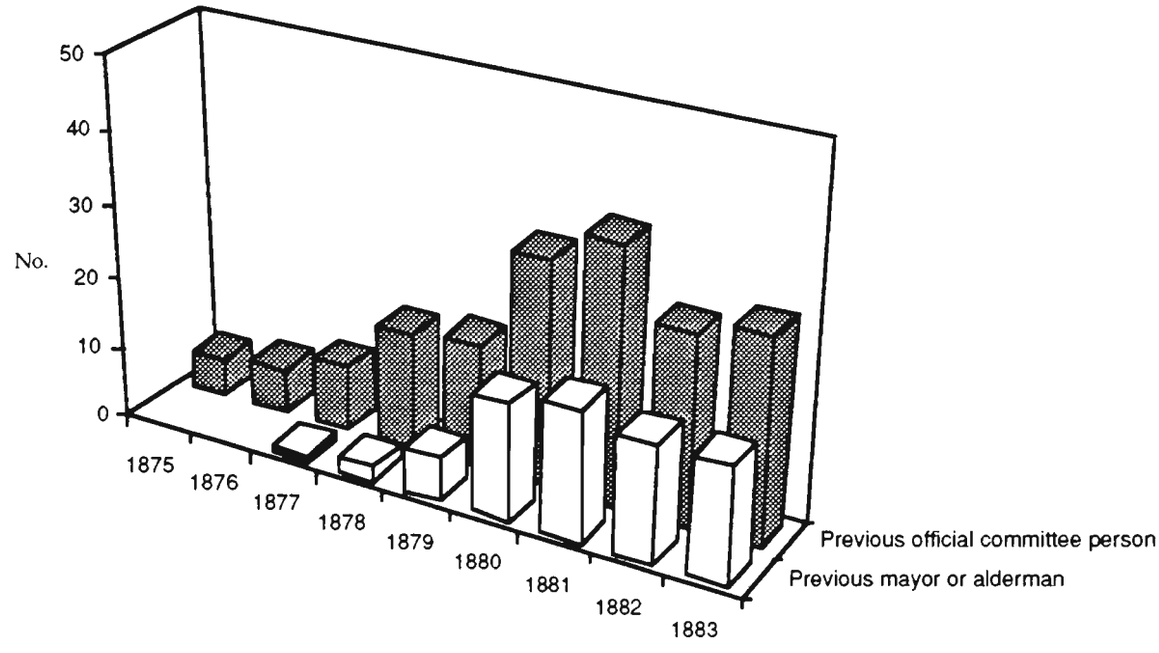
152 *CHPRA,* 4 August 1877, p. 2.

153 As reported in *The Cooktown Courier,* 18 December 1878, p. 3.

154 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 3 January 1877, p. 3.

some of the disgruntled would not have been above some sniping from the sidelines, thus further undermining the concept of community.[155]

Figure 5.12 - Summary of Individuals in Cooktown Retired from Public Office 1875-1883
(showing cumulative totals still resident)



Source: Data derived from Cooktown sample register.

Finally, of course, it is necessary to look at the part played by the Chinese in Cooktown in civic affairs. Contrary to some accounts of early Cooktown, it seems that many of those in the Chinese business community were almost model citizens. Three Chinese merchants, for example, were amongst the earliest subscribers to the hospital construction fund, with one of their donations (of two guineas) entitling its subscriber — had he wished — to stand as a committee-person.[156] Another Chinese merchant made an

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155 The Cooktown progress association, for example, was specifically set up because of disenchantment with the municipal council. Moreover, the public letter calling for its establishment was signed by twelve prominent citizens, seven of whom were previous aldermen or sitting justices: see *The Cooktown Courier,* 30 May 1877, p. 3. But see the editorial in *The Cooktown Courier,* 28 July 1877, p. 3 complaining that the effect was 'to foment a jealousy and course of misunderstanding' which ran contrary to the interests of the community.

156 See *CHPRA,* 30 April 1874, p. 3. In 1877, for example, only seventeen persons were eligible to stand.

unsolicited donation to the hospital of mattresses and pillows.[157] Indeed, after the Chinese community had even made generous donations to the Roman Catholic church building fund, *The Cooktown Herald* pondered 'how many Catholics [in Cooktown] would subscribe to the building of a joss house?'[158]

Despite such civic generosity, it is evident that the Chinese in Cooktown were never really accepted into the Europeans' concept of community, nor does it seem that the Chinese particularly wanted to be. Delegations of prominent Chinese citizens, for example, were usually invited to meet visiting dignitaries at the wharf upon their arrival in Cooktown.[159] But the same Chinese merchants were noticeably absent from the civic receptions held over dinner later that night.[160]

There is also only the one report, mentioned earlier in this chapter, of individual Chinese nominating to stand as aldermen or on official committees. In part, their efforts may have been thwarted by the view put forth by *The Cooktown Courier* that most of the Chinese ratepayers in the town were business entities, rather than individuals, which thus conferred no eligibility even to vote.[161] It seems more likely, though, that most of the Chinese residents were simply not interested in trying to gain entry to the European-based community, or in supporting any individual who did.[162]

The Business Background of Community Leaders

Statistics derived from the Cooktown sample register and summarised at Table 5.19 (on next page) show that, on a numerical basis,

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157 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 19 September 1875, p. 2. Note also that the Chinese business community offered several times in 1875 to build and support a hospital for Chinese patients if the authorities would provide the land, an offer not taken up: see *CHPRA,* 18 September 1875, p. 2.

158 See *CHPRA,* 13 November 1875, p. 2.

159 See, for example, the report of the visit by the Governor of Queensland: *The Cooktown Courier,* 21 March 1877, p. 3.

160 See, for example, the report of the banquet for the Colonial Treasurer and Post-Master General: *The Cooktown Courier,* 21 November 1877, p. 3.

161 Editorial in *The Cooktown Courier,* 31 January 1877, p. 3.

162 Sea Wah, the Chinese publican who nominated as an alderman in the February 1877 elections was married to a European woman, which may have alienated him from his countrymen.

over 50 per cent of the civic office holders and committee-persons in Cooktown between 1874 and 1885 were self-employed merchants or businessmen.

Table 5.19 - Summary by Occupation of Office Holders and Committee-persons in Cooktown 1874-1885
(as percentage of the occupations shown, based on total numbers)

Occupation	Mayor or Aldermen	Official Committee-person	Unofficial Committee-person	Average
Artisans	20.2	6.3	7.8	11.4
Basic white collar	0.9	3.1	8.9	4.3
Managerial white collar	18.4	15.0	4.4	12.6
Professional	10.5	15.8	22.2	16.2
Mercantile	50.0	59.8	56.7	55.5

Source: Data derived from Cooktown sample register.

Given, however, that the proportion of merchants and the like was typically close to 60 per cent of the Cooktown workforce, it could be argued that the figures at Table 5.19 are hardly surprising. Accordingly, Table 5.20 shows the same basic data rearranged to reflect the proportion of office holders and committee-persons within the various occupational groupings. It shows that, on a proportional basis, the most influential group in the town's affairs was the professional class, followed by white collar workers and managers.

Table 5.20 - Summary by Occupation of Office Holders and Committee-persons in Cooktown 1874-1885
(as percentage of the occupations shown, but based on the proportion of office holders within each occupational grouping)

Occupation	Mayor or Aldermen	Official Committee-person	Unofficial Committee-person	Average
Artisans	18.4	12.2	5.9	12.2
White collar (combined)	29.8	25.7	17.1	24.2
Professional	34.7	45.3	60.9	47.0
Mercantile	17.1	16.8	16.1	16.6

Source: Calculated from the figures at Table 5.19 indexed by averages derived from Table 5.15 (Comparative Structure of the Cooktown Workforce).

Again, it could be argued that those figures are hardly surprising, especially in relation to the professional class. What Tables 5.19 and 5.20 also show, however, is an inkling of Cooktown's social class structure *vis-à-vis* civic involvement. There was, for example, a higher proportion of professionals involved on 'unofficial' committees — which included the cricket and jockey clubs, and the temperance and amateur histrionic societies — than in the hurly-burly of the municipal council. Conversely, there was a higher proportion of artisans — with a presumed reputation for being solid, trustworthy businessmen — involved in the council than on unofficial committees.[163]

That social division, in normal circumstances, would probably not be a bad thing, given that successful businessmen could reasonably be expected to be more pragmatic in dealing with the affairs of council than solicitors, doctors or ministers of religion. In Cooktown's case, it was unfortunate that the business community was so riven by personal animosities.

Finally, as was mentioned earlier in this chapter, an attempt was made in the Cooktown sample register to analyse occupational mobility, with the object of determining whether there was a quantifiable relationship between it and civic involvement. Was there any evidence, for example, that individuals aspiring to public office were primarily those in the business community who were 'upwardly mobile' and may have been using public office as a means of improving their business interests? Conversely, were there some who saw a successful business career as an entree to public office, with its perceived enhanced status within the community?

In the event, the statistics were inconclusive, largely because occupations as listed in the various sources were described in too little detail to enable any meaningful analysis of mobility either within or between occupational groupings. Similarly, anecdotal evidence was too sparing to enable any reasonable conclusions to be drawn.

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163 It must be said, though, that artisans — particularly those in well-established businesses with perhaps one or two assistants or apprentices — probably had more time for council affairs than, for example, a busy doctor or solicitor.

Advancing the Interests of the Town

In their favour, the early residents of Cooktown had the unifying reality of being part of an Anglo-Saxon-Celtic outpost on the edge of 'civilisation'. The dangers and hardships they faced daily, in the form of the environment, the weather and the threat of attack by Aborigines, would have resulted in some sense of community in the face of a common peril. In addition, once the Palmer River goldfields were proved, the flood of new arrivals through the port of Cooktown and the export of a fortune in gold would have reinforced to the people of the town the economic importance of their community, not least in the context of the wider development of Queensland.

Notwithstanding such potential bonds, it is evident from the discussion in this chapter that the divisive effects of a highly transitory population, together with what seems to have been the extremely materialistic outlook of its oversized business community, militated against the early development of the concept of community. That situation was then compounded by an influx of Chinese settlers and a series of intense rivalries between key personalities within the European community. The result was that the early residents of Cooktown were never particularly successful in transforming themselves into a cohesive and constructive community, able to advance the interests of the town.

That is not to deny, of course, that a number of Cooktown's early residents undoubtedly saw their medium-to-long term future in the town, and that they worked hard to establish the infrastructure, services and civic institutions usually associated with a viable urban development. The point being made, however, is that Cooktown's business community seemed blinkered by its preoccupation with the town's role as the service centre for the Palmer River goldfields. Moreover, that preoccupation stymied the development of a civic leadership, and a civic vision which may have focused more attention and resources on Cooktown's longer-term viability.

Against that background of a divided community, lacking civic cohesion and vision, the next chapter examines the structural links between Cooktown and the rest of Queensland, and the town's success or otherwise

in accessing government expenditure for the typical range of works and services necessary for urban development.

CHAPTER 6 - SMALL TOWN IN A LARGE COLONY

Cooktown in the 1870s, as has been discussed in previous chapters, was a business-oriented township, blighted by a transitory population and riven by a series of personal rivalries involving several key members of the civic community. The people of the town were also seriously divided over the issue of Chinese immigration. In addition, it seems that a certain proportion of the community professed no particular allegiance either to the town or to Queensland, with *The Cooktown Courier* noting in late 1876 that

> ... many of our local readers ... tell us that they are not Queenslanders and are not personally interested in the welfare of the colony.[1]

The reality was, of course, that the township of Cooktown was geographically part of the colony of Queensland, notwithstanding the suggestion by the Governor of New South Wales at the time of Queensland's separation that Cape Palmerston (south of Mackay) might be a convenient northern boundary for the new colony.[2] Cooktown also had far stronger legislative, commercial and probably cultural links with Brisbane, and the other main centres in Queensland, than it had with either Sydney or New South Wales. Moreover, whether its residents liked it or not, the development of Cooktown was largely dependent upon the largesse of those in Brisbane who controlled the colonial purse-strings of Queensland.

Needless to say, many of the civic-minded residents of Cooktown were initially sceptical that a bureaucracy located some 1600 kilometres to their south would be particularly sympathetic to the interests of the

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1 *The Cooktown Courier,* 11 December 1876, p. 3. Presumably, the inference was that such residents were from New South Wales, or perhaps Victoria, and saw their residency in Cooktown as a short-term expediency.

2 Sir William Denison's intention, it was claimed by the *Cooktown Herald and Palmer River Advertiser (CHPRA),* was that the new colony of Queensland should be only the temporary administrator of the far north, 'holding it till the people came who were to inhabit it': editorial in *CHPRA,* 16 September 1874, p. 2.

fledgling settlement, if only because of 'the tyranny of distance'.[3] Throughout 1874 and 1875, in particular, such scepticism was fuelled by what many residents saw as the bias of southern legislators and administrators against the north, not least over the allocation of funds for public works programs. Compounding the perceived injustice was their belief that Far North Queensland, and Cooktown especially, contributed more than a fair share of the general revenue of the colony, mainly in the form of customs duties.

Given that background, it is hardly surprising that much of the primary source material on early Cooktown — in the context of its role as a newly-established township in Queensland — seems predominantly about the attempts by the town to secure an equitable share of government resources. Indeed, the associated issues of municipal government and parliamentary representation were fundamentally linked to the issue of resource expenditure *vis-à-vis* the civic advancement of the town.

Obviously, however, there are some broader issues. How important, for example, and how enduring was the revenue contribution of Cooktown and the Palmer River goldfields to the wider, economic development of Queensland? Similarly, what role did Cooktown and the goldfields play in attracting immigrants and investment capital to Queensland in the 1870s and early 1880s? Against those questions are the important issues of whether Cooktown and its hinterland were in fact ill-served by the authorities in Brisbane and whether the long-term viability of Cooktown especially was jeopardised by the level of government spending on infrastructure development and public works generally.

This chapter addresses those issues by examining the economic nexus between Cooktown and the Palmer River goldfields, and then the economic importance of both in the wider context of Queensland's overall development in the 1870s and 1880s. It makes the point that although the direct economic contribution of Cooktown and the Palmer to the wider development of Queensland should not be over-stated, an important aspect

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3 The opening of the track from Cooktown to the Palmer River diggings is often cited as an example of government enterprise in the development of the goldfields of Far North Queensland. There had been, however, very little interest shown by the government in the physical development of mining townships at, for example, the Gilbert River or Georgetown.

was the optimism they inspired, and the catalytic effect they had, upon the Queensland economy in the 1870s and early 1880s.

The chapter also addresses Cooktown's move to municipal government and parliamentary representation, within the context of the community's efforts to achieve what was perceived to be an equitable share of government resources. It concludes, after analysing the 'balance sheet' of revenue versus expenditure, that the people of Cooktown probably had some justification in feeling 'hard done' by successive governments. Indeed, the prevailing sentiment — which carries forward into the next chapter — was that the town had a future, and needed only a fair share of outside help to achieve it.

The Economic Nexus between Cooktown and the Palmer

In many contemporary discussions of the economic importance of Cooktown and the Palmer River goldfields, the assumption seemed to be that the two were synonymous, at least in economic terms.[4] Yet the two locations were some 200 kilometres apart by road (see Map 6.1 over). Ballarat, in contrast, only some eighty kilometres from the Victorian coastline, would rarely have been linked in an economic sense with the ports of either Geelong or Melbourne.

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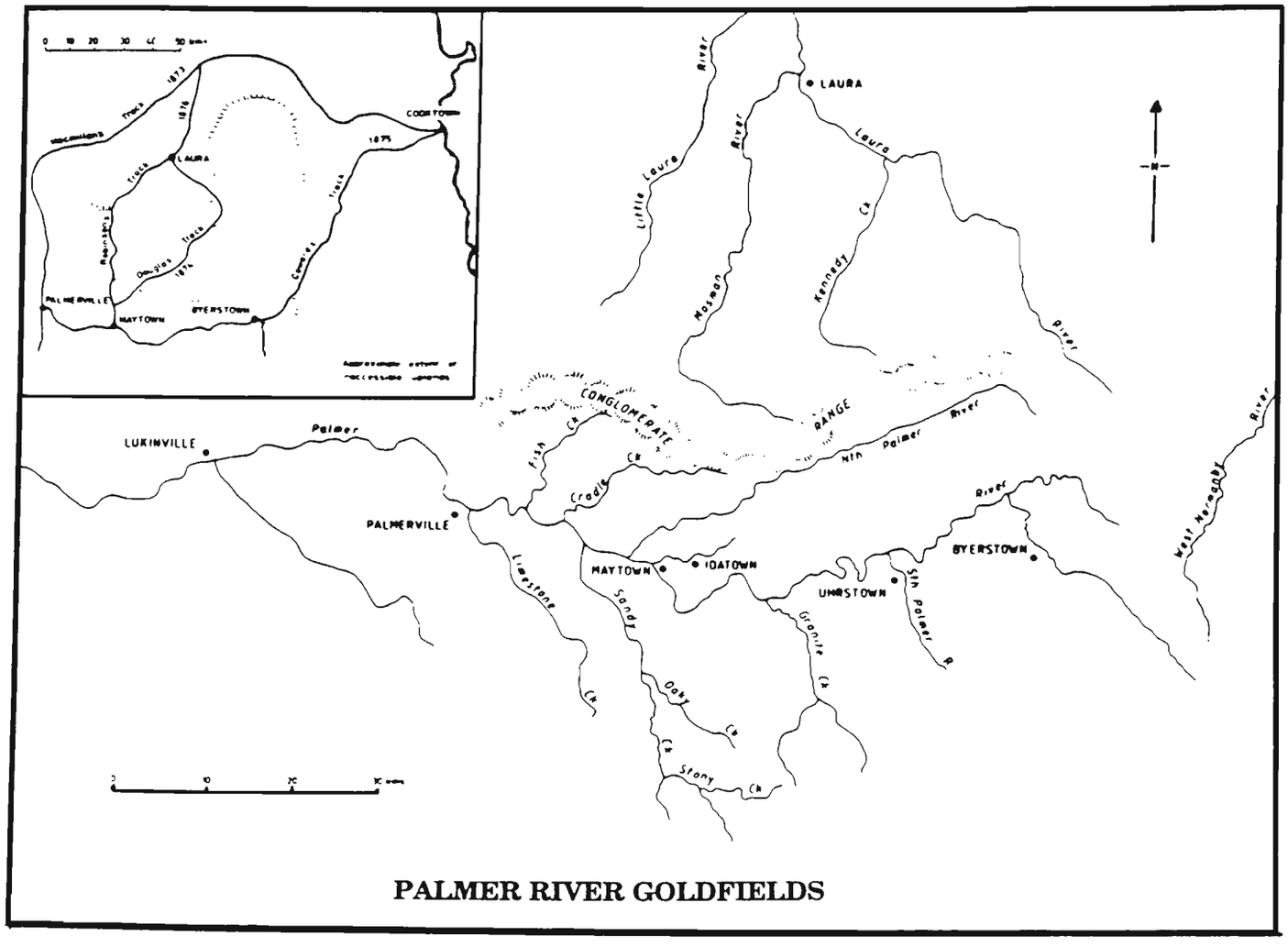
4 See, for example, the editorial in *The Cooktown Courier,* 4 October 1876, p. 2 urging the expenditure by the government of at least £100,000 for roads and bridges between Cooktown and the Palmer on the basis that 'our contribution to the general revenue is ... nearly £100,000 per annum'.

Map 6.1 - Cooktown and the Palmer River Goldfields Settlements



Source: N. Kirkman, 'The Palmer River goldfield' in K.H. Kennedy (ed.), *Readings in North Queensland Mining history*, James Cook University of North Queensland, Townsville, 1980, p. 112.

The essential difference would seem to be that Cooktown was established for the sole purpose of providing a point of access (and market outlet) for the Palmer River goldfields, whereas Geelong and Melbourne were towns in their own right well before the discovery of gold in the Victorian hinterland in the early 1850s. The other key difference was that Ballarat and Bendigo, for example, similarly became service centres in their own right and attained town status within a year or so of the arrival of the first gold-miners into the area. The Palmer River goldfields, by contrast, failed to sustain any permanent settlement larger than the makeshift

townships of Palmerville, Maytown, Byerstown and Lukinville (see Map 6.1 on previous page).[5]

The reasons behind the impermanence of the Palmer townships are probably several. Obviously, the alluvial nature of the goldfields meant that the workforce was constantly shifting in pursuit of new workings.[6] The opening of new fields elsewhere also drew off many European miners, who seemed easily lured by the prospect of 'greener pastures'.[7] The other important factor was that the Palmer River goldfields were at the extreme limits of the European frontier in northern Queensland, with little likelihood that the Palmer would prove to be the stepping-off point for undeveloped areas of the hinterland further inland.[8] Accordingly, there was little incentive for the government to provide good access roads into the area, as the first link in a transportation network radiating further inland.

There was similarly little incentive for the government to put in place the physical infrastructure at the Palmer itself, as the basis of a possible regional hub. Likewise, there would have been little inclination on the part of commercial firms to set up businesses at the Palmer in the expectation of being able to expand their market base into adjoining areas.[9] It probably does seem reasonable, therefore, for Cooktown and the Palmer River goldfields, despite the physical distance between them, to be considered as an economic entity in any consideration of their contribution to the wider development of Queensland.

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5 For a good account of the physical development of the Palmer mining settlements see N. Kirkman, 'The Palmer River goldfield' in K.H. Kennedy (ed.), *Readings in North Queensland mining history,* James Cook University of North Queensland, Townsville, 1980, pp. 112-44.

6 The distance between Lukinville and Byerstown, the eastern and western ends respectively of the Palmer River goldfields, was some 120 kilometres. The main goldmining centre of Ballarat, by contrast, was in the Buninyong Range only some ten kilometres south of the town.

7 The opening of the Hodgkinson goldfields in mid 1876, for example, resulted in an exodus of European miners from the Palmer and Etheridge fields: see, for example, the report of the Etheridge goldfield warden in the Annual Report of the Department of Mines for 1877, as tabled in *Votes and proceedings of the Legislative Assembly of Queensland [QVP],* 2, 1878, p. 311.

8 That was in marked contrast to Bendigo, for example, which became the nodal point for Victoria's development of the Murray Valley basin.

9 See the editorial in *The Cooktown Courier,* 5 December 1874, p. 3 complaining that not a single bank had established a branch or agency at the Palmer, fully a year after the opening of the goldfields.

That consideration does, however, have perhaps two qualifications. The first, as discussed in Chapter 2, is that the *raison d'être* of Cooktown as *the* port for the Palmer did not go unchallenged in the early years of the town, with Weary Bay, Cardwell, Cairns and even Townsville at times being touted as preferred points of access. Certainly, once the Hodgkinson goldfield was opened in mid 1876 (some eighty kilometres southeast of the Palmer), the bulk of its trade was with Port Douglas and Cairns.[10]

The second qualification is that from about 1876 onwards, as the output from the Palmer peaked, certain voices within the Cooktown community attempted to downplay the town's dependency upon the Palmer. An editorial in *The Cooktown Courier* of early 1876 for example, asserted that

> ... although to a very great extent dependent on the success of the Palmer ... [the town] has within itself, as the centre of a rising and prosperous population, all the elements attendant upon the formation of one of the most important ports along the northeast coast of Australia.[11]

The Economic Importance of Cooktown and the Palmer

How best to measure the economic importance of a town or region is a moot point. Obviously, the clear distinction needs to be made between a town or region's contribution to colonial product, which is the sum of private and public product, and government revenue — the latter being the figure which determines the amount, apart from loans and deficits, the government had available for expenditure.[12]

In Cooktown's case, contemporary accounts tended to focus — mistakenly in an economic sense — on gold production and customs

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10 See, for example, the editorial in *The Cooktown Courier,* 11 August 1877, p. 3 estimating that 'only one-twentieth of our revenue is derived from duties collected on Hodgkinson goods'.

11 *The Cooktown Courier,* 22 January 1876, p. 2.

12 The key difficulty in analysing a town's contribution to colonial product is the dearth of available statistics.

revenue.[13] Indeed, both *The Cooktown Courier* and *The Cooktown Herald* diligently reported customs receipts on a fortnightly basis throughout most of 1874 and 1875, while the official returns of annual gold production on the Palmer were frequently a source of lengthy editorial comment.[14] The comparative statements showing the share of revenue collected at the various Queensland ports were a source of similar editorial comment, with *The Cooktown Courier* in October 1878, for example, asserting that the figures for the previous quarter illustrated that

> ... we are again entitled to claim for ourselves the position of being the second port in the colony [after Brisbane].[15]

Newspaper editorials were also quick to correct any perceived understatement in the official returns. *The Cooktown Herald* in April 1874, for example, claimed that customs duty on five-sixths of the goods imported to Cooktown was typically paid at either Brisbane or Rockhampton, and that

> ... if the duty paid on them were but added to the revenue collected here ... we might reasonably place the total [for the first two weeks of April 1874] at £8000 [rather than £2140].[16]

A similar editorial theme was that thousands of ounces of gold were smuggled out of the country by departing Chinese, thus resulting in an

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13 Some emphasis was also given to shipping numbers and cargo tonnages. Those statistics were somewhat meaningless, however, in a comparative context with other ports, given that some ships destined for southern ports dropped off only a handful of passengers and cargo, against others destined exclusively for Cooktown. The available records do not show sufficient cargo details, in particular, to enable any meaningful comparisons.

14 See, for example, the editorial in *CHPRA,* 22 April 1874, p. 2 noting that the town 'should see some return in the form of roads' for the £2140 in customs receipts collected in the first two weeks of April. See also the editorial in *The Cooktown Courier,* 1 January 1876, p. 2 noting that gold production for 1875 had increased 41,383 ounces over the previous year, while customs revenue had increased from £22,951 to £49,524.

15 *The Cooktown Courier,* 18 October 1878, p. 2.

16 *CHPRA,* 22 April 1874, p. 2.

understatement of actual production figures.[17] Newspapers also lambasted the government for its charge of one shilling and six-pence per ounce of gold conveyed under police escort from the Palmer River to Cooktown. The basis of their criticism was that many miners were reputedly sending their gold to Georgetown to evade the tax, with the result that Cooktown was missing out on '[the] credit for the amount which the district really produces'.[18]

Notwithstanding such concerns for the accuracy of the official figures, it is evident that — between 1874 and 1877 in particular — the Palmer River goldfields provided a significant contribution to economic growth in the colony.[19] In the space of those five years, the Palmer produced 839,000 ounces of gold, valued at nearly £3 million.[20] That was 28 per cent more than the Charters Towers' fields had produced in six years and 25 per cent more than Gympie had produced in ten years.[21] Indeed, as can be seen at Figure 6.1, the Palmer River between 1873 and 1879 was clearly the richest gold discovery in the first twenty-five years of Queensland.

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17 See, for example, the assertion in *The Cooktown Courier,* 27 June 1877, p. 3 that the 456 Chinese passengers departing for Hong Kong on the *SS* Zamboanga were probably smuggling out at least 500 ounces of gold. The irony was that no duty was payable on gold declared for export; the legislation simply required that exports be declared to the Collector of Customs.

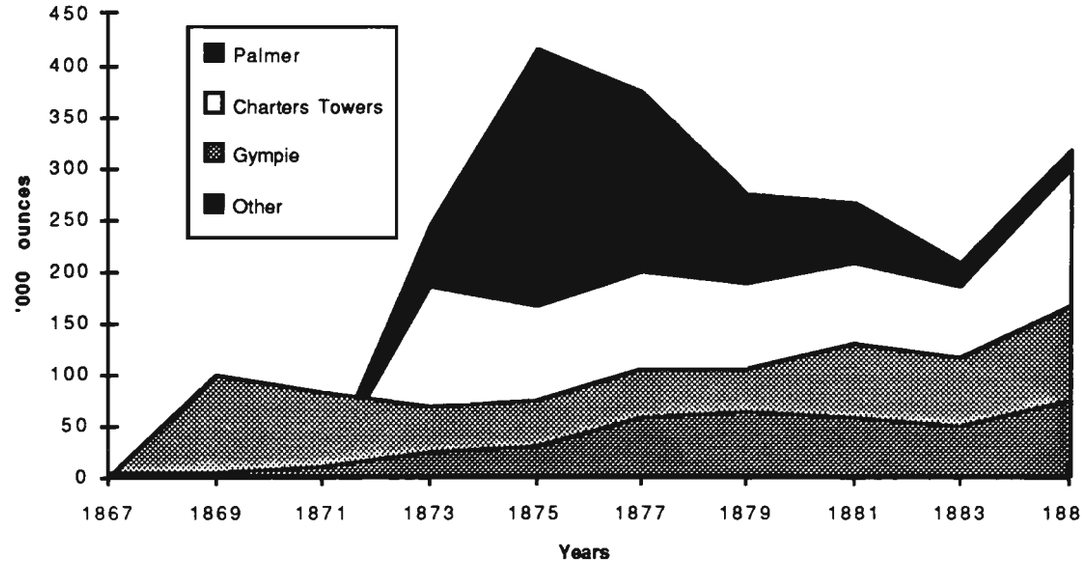
18 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 20 June 1874, p. 3.

19 That contribution, however, needs to be seen in the context of the contributory input from other sectors, including the pastoral, agricultural, fishing, manufacturing and transport industries, for example. Indeed, across the period 1861-90, it was the expansion of the pastoral industry in Queensland which played a key role in overall economic growth: see J.R. Laverty, 'The Queensland economy 1860-1915' in D.J. Murphy (ed.), *Prelude to power: the rise and fall of the Labor Party in Queensland, 1815-1915,* Jacaranda Press, Milton, 1970, p. 29.

20 See *QVP,* 2, 1886, p. 263.

21 *QVP,* 2, 1886, p. 263.

Figure 6.1 - Gold Production in Queensland 1867-85
(showing total annual production stratified into the major fields)

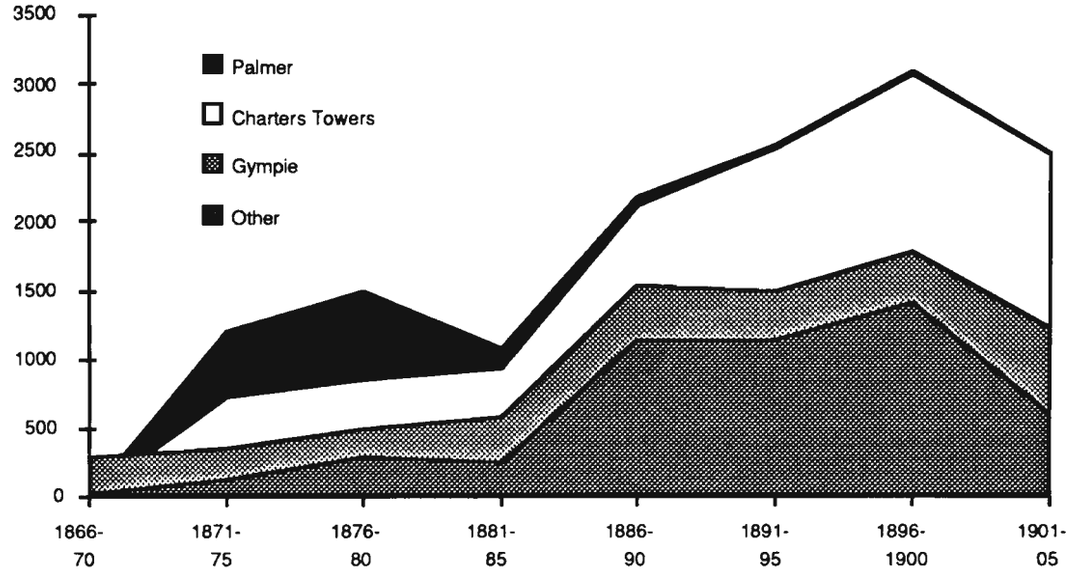


Source: Data derived from Annual Reports of the Queensland Department of Mines as published in successive issues of *QVP*, 1878-85. Figures for 1867-76 derived from a variety of sources including *The Cooktown Courier* and *CHPRA*, as well as extrapolations based on the returns in *QVP*, 1, 1906, pp. 1186-7.

In the longer term, however, the significance of the Palmer River goldfields pales somewhat. Figure 6.2 (over), for example, extending the illustration of gold production in Queensland out to 1905, shows that the output from the Palmer River was eventually dwarfed by that of Charters Towers and 'other fields' in the 1880s and 1890s. Indeed, the aggregates from the fields at Charters Towers and Gympie surpassed the Palmer River in 1885 and 1887 respectively.[22]

22 See *QVP*, 2, 1886, p. 263 and *QVP*, 3, 1891, pp. 647-8.

Figure 6.2 - Gold Production in Queensland 1866-1905
(showing total production by five-yearly periods stratified into the major fields)



Source: Data derived from Annual Report of the Queensland Department of Mines for 1905 as published in *QVP*, 1, 1906, pp. 1186-7.

Moreover, many contemporary newspaper accounts, citing the cash value of the gold which passed through Cooktown, gave the impression that the total amount was being added directly to the coffers of the Queensland economy.[23] As was discussed in Chapter 4, though, under the heading 'The Quantification of Commercial Activity', it is evident that only around 5 per cent of the value of each ounce of gold produced at the Palmer found its way into the general revenue of the colony, in the form of customs duty on goods imported through Cooktown.[24] Moreover, Figure 4.7 (at page 166) suggested that close to 50 per cent of the value of each Chinese-produced ounce of gold went directly to China and that an additional 22 per cent ended up in the hands of a Chinese financier or merchant in Cooktown.

Indeed, by applying the estimates at Figures 4.6 and 4.7 (at pages 165 and 166 respectively) to the known yields of gold from the Palmer, it can be seen from Figure 6.3 (over) that only around 40 per cent of the total value of production across the years 1874 to 1885 remained in European

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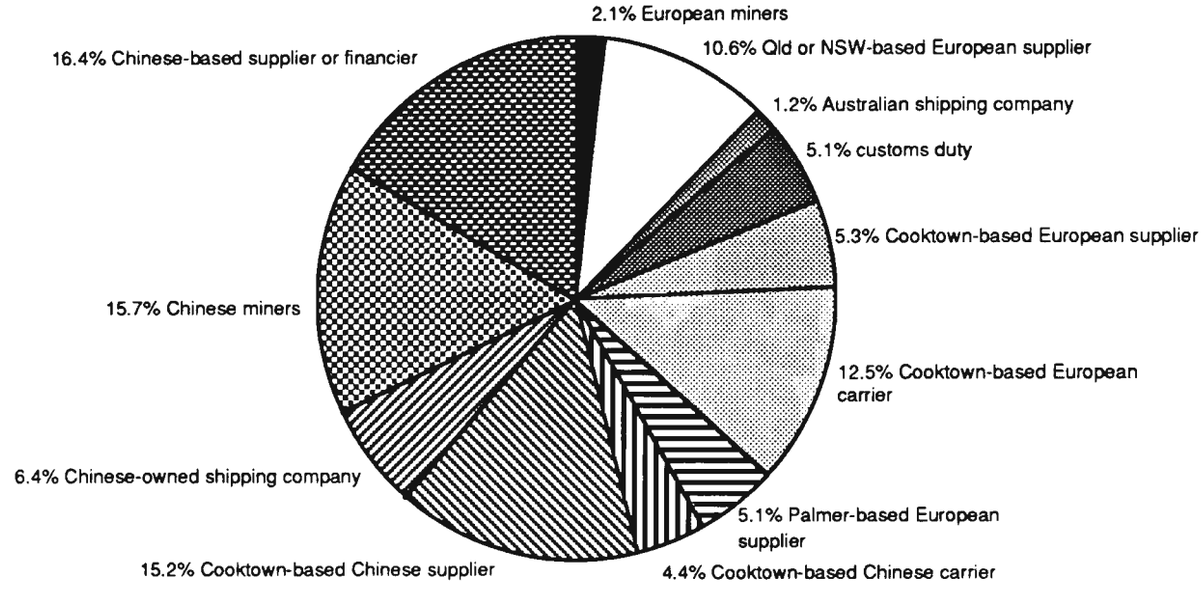
23 See, for example, the editorial discussion in *The Cooktown Courier,* 2 January 1875, p. 2 citing the value of gold produced in 1874 as £514,000.

24 Figure 4.6 (at page 165) put the customs duty component of European-produced gold at 6.5 per cent, while Figure 4.7 (at page 166) estimated the same component for Chinese-produced gold at 4.4 per cent.

hands. Within that 40 per cent was the government's share of 5.1 per cent of the total, in the form of customs duty to the value of around £250,000. Chinese interests, by comparison, ended up with around £3 million of the total value of £5.02 million.[25]

Figure 6.3 - The Monetary Share of Gold Produced on the Palmer River Goldfields 1874-85
(by percentages of the 1.256 million ounces produced, valued at £5.02 million)



Source: Calculated by applying the estimates at Figures 4.6 and 4.7 to the total yield from the Palmer River between 1874-85 (as listed in successive issues of *QVP),* indexed by the productivity ratios for European and Chinese miners as shown at Figure 4.5.

So those in Cooktown who continued to talk up the raw figures for gold production, as an indicator of the town's economic importance within the colony, were — with the admitted benefit of hindsight — basically wrong on two counts. The first is that gold production needed to be seen, not simply against the value of gold mined elsewhere in the colony, but in the overall context of public and private product.[26] The second is that

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25 Calculated on the basis that Chinese interests, as shown at Figure 6.3, accounted for 58.1 per cent of the cost components of the total production of 1.256 million ounces (valued at about £5.02 million in total, at the sale price of £4 per ounce).

26 It can be argued, of course, that without the benefit of the economic statistics and analyses so readily available today, it was probably reasonable for 'boosters' in Cooktown to use gold production as an indicator of the town's relative economic importance.

actual government revenue from gold production was considerably less than newspaper editorials, at least, frequently suggested.

It is similarly evident that a number of other economic statistics for either Cooktown or the Palmer pale somewhat when considered in the wider context. An editorial in *The Cooktown Courier* of October 1876, for example, asserted that

> ... our contribution to the general revenue is ... nearly £100,000 per annum [and that with other revenue added for licences etc] ... we are contributing more than one-fifth of the whole direct revenue of Queensland.[27]

In reality, customs revenue in Cooktown never exceeded £70,700 per annum nor more than 13.2 per cent of the Queensland total (see Figure 6.4 over). When licence fees for the Palmer, Etheridge and Hodgkinson goldfields were added in the peak year of 1877, the combined customs and licence revenue came to £78,644, representing 14.5 per cent of the Queensland total for the same revenue sources.[28]

Moreover, when viewed across the years 1874 to 1885, it can be seen from Figure 6.4 (over) that customs revenue collected at Cooktown averaged around 8 per cent of the Queensland total and was declining to under 5 per cent by the mid 1880s. Indeed, as will be discussed in Chapter 7, the major factor in Cooktown's surge in revenue production between 1875 and 1879 was not because of the wealth of gold being shipped out from the Palmer River. Rather, it was because of the influx of Chinese, and their ongoing resupply through the port of Cooktown. Once that flow subsided, in part because of the agitation of certain elements within the Cooktown community, the revenue production of Cooktown declined in parallel.

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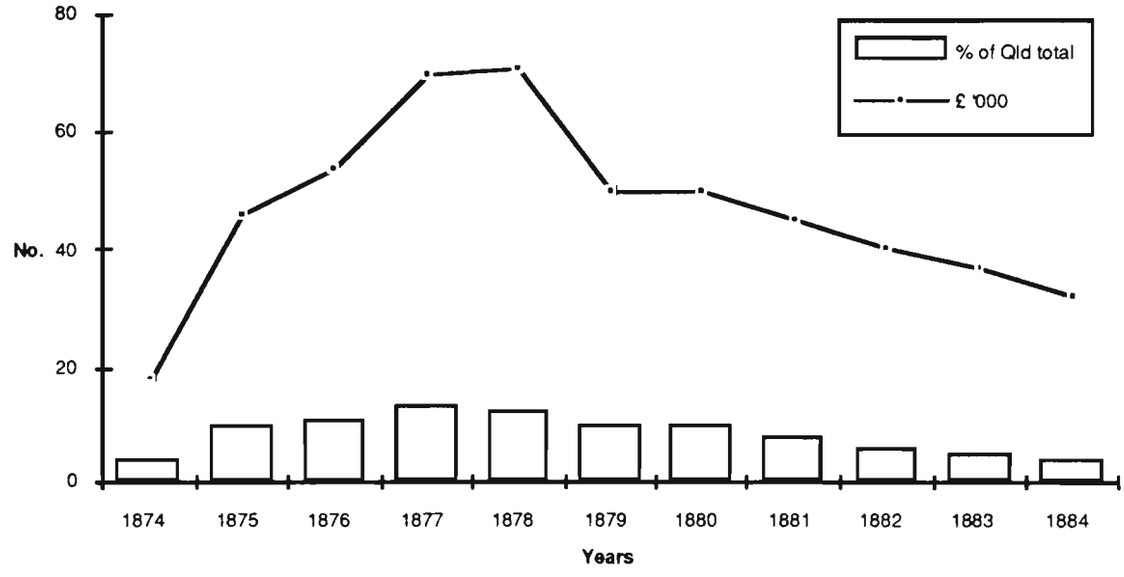
27 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 4 October 1876, p. 2.

28 The combined value of goldfields licences and customs revenue for Queensland in 1877 was £543,667: see *QVP,* 2, 1878, p. 306.

Figure 6.4 - Customs Revenue in Cooktown 1874-84
(in value terms and as a percentage of the Queensland total)



Source: Data derived from annual returns in successive issues of *QVP*, 1875-85.

What the foregoing analysis suggests is that the economic contribution of Cooktown and the Palmer River goldfields to the wider development of Queensland should not be over-stated. In direct financial terms, the importance of Cooktown and its hinterland was short-lived and progressively eroded by the more systematic exploitation of gold deposits elsewhere in the colony. Equally, however, what should not be under-rated is the significance of the Palmer River goldfields in terms of the optimism they inspired within Queensland and, indeed, the catalytic effect they had upon the overall Queensland economy in the 1870s and early 1880s.

The Catalytic Importance of Cooktown and the Palmer

Certainly, it has been conventional wisdom that while the discovery of gold at Gympie in 1867 rescued the ailing Queensland economy from severe recession, it was the discovery of alluvial gold in Far North Queensland in the early 1870s which climaxed public optimism and set the stage for the boom of the 1870s and 1880s.[29] *The Cooktown Courier* in early March 1875, for example, contended that the discoveries at the Palmer had 'raised the colony of Queensland ... in European estimation and very

29 See, for example, T.A. Coghlan, *Labour and industry in Australia,* Vol. 3, Oxford University Press, London, 1918, p. 1633 and Laverty, 'The Queensland economy' p. 30.

materially improved the value of Queensland securities'.[30] *The Cooktown Herald* similarly asserted that

> ... if the American estimate [based on the Californian experience] is correct, the simple announcement of the discovery of gold in this district was worth a large sum of money to Queensland.[31]

Nevertheless, the relative importance of gold-mining — as has been discussed earlier — needs to be considered in the context of the wider economic development of Queensland. Similarly, because the Queensland economy was at an earlier stage of development than the southern colonies, economic development in Queensland was more dependent upon (and more influenced by) primary industries, with Butlin's thesis of the importance of urban growth not readily applicable to Queensland until the late 1880s.[32] The geography of Queensland, the decentralisation of its population and the lack of a centralised transport and communications system further militated against urban concentration, while elevating the relative importance of mining, agriculture and the pastoral industry compared to the southern colonies.[33]

The rapid inflow of British investment capital similarly needs to be seen in a context wider than its acknowledged link to the gold discoveries in North Queensland. Clearly, the reports from the Palmer contributed significantly to the highly optimistic view held in London of the colony's potential. But it was not until after 1879 (by which time the Palmer was effectively in decline) that a plentiful supply of British capital began to flow into Queensland, made available from the British loan market as a result of the changed investment climate in the West Indies.[34] Butlin also contends that it was primarily the sustained gold production of the 1850s and 1860s in Victoria which encouraged the influx of British capital to Australia and that, by the mid 1870s, it was the wool boom rather than gold which had

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30 *The Cooktown Courier,* 6 March 1875, p. 2.
31 *CHPRA,* 15 July 1874, p. 3.
32 See Laverty, 'The Queensland economy', pp. 29 and 31.
33 See Laverty, 'The Queensland economy', p. 35.
34 See G.P. Taylor, 'Business and politics in Queensland, 1859-1895' in *The New Zealand Journal of History,* 1, 1, April 1967, pp. 77-8.

'assume[d] a controlling position in Australian external economic relations'.[35]

Another dimension is the role of the gold discoveries in attracting immigrants to Queensland. Again, conventional wisdom is that the Palmer River gold-rush not only attracted to Queensland a large number of Chinese, and Europeans from elsewhere in Australia, but was important also in drawing a considerable number of prospective residents to the colony from Great Britain and Ireland.[36] The *Cooktown Herald* in July 1874 noted that

> [t]here is no influence ... that will so rapidly draw a large population to a country ... as the discovery of gold.[37]

The fact that Queensland's population increased from some 125,000 in 1871 to 181,288 by 1876, and that the population of North Queensland increased across the same period from the low hundreds to in excess of 19,000, would seem to support such view.[38] What is less clear, though, is how many of the immigrants to Queensland were actually destined for the goldfields. Most of the 20,654 Chinese who disembarked at Cooktown between 1875 and 1877 were headed for the Palmer River.[39] But given that no ships from Europe berthed at Cooktown before November 1881, it is difficult to estimate how many of the 31,204 immigrants from Great Britain and Ireland, who arrived in Queensland between 1874 and 1878, made their way north to the Palmer.[40]

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35 N.G. Butlin, *Investment in Australian economic development 1861-1900,* Cambridge University Press, London, 1964, pp. 32-35.

36 See, for example, Butlin, *Investment in Australian economic development,* p. 27 noting that almost all of the increase in Australia's population between 1861 and 1890 was attributable to immigration from Great Britain and Ireland. See also J.R. Laverty, 'urban development' in W.H. Richmond and P.C. Sharma (eds.), *Mining and Australia,* University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1983, p. 123 noting that 'Queensland ... also experienced the demographic quickening that gold engendered'.

37 *CHPRA,* 15 July 1874, p. 3.

38 See population statistics tabled by the Registrar-General in *QVP,* 2, 1874, p. 7 and *QVP,* 2, 1876, pp. 376, 812 and 819.

39 The total derived from 'immigration to Cooktown' statistics in successive issues of *QVP,* 1876-78.

40 The total derived from 'immigration to Queensland' statistics in successive issues of *QVP,* 1875-79.

It is axiomatic that a percentage of them would have headed for the Palmer, although how many had left their homeland with the specific intention of doing so is unknown. It is similarly unclear how many of those who immigrated with the intention of proceeding to the goldfields changed their minds once they arrived in Brisbane and were confronted with the physical realities of the Queensland environment.[41] It is reasonable to assume that a fair proportion of each arriving ship-load would have been seeking more traditional employment.

Indeed, in reporting the assimilation of a group of recent arrivals *via* the immigration depot in Townsville, *The Cooktown Herald* in July 1875 gave no indication that any were interested in employment in the Palmer/Cooktown area, despite the plea that '[this district] would be glad to take a fair share of every instalment of such arrivals'.[42] That appeal probably related primarily to the shortage in Cooktown of single females for employment as domestic servants; nevertheless, editorials in the Cooktown newspapers throughout 1875 and 1876 continued to press the government 'for our quota' of immigrants, suggesting perhaps that very few of those who entered Queensland *via* other ports were subsequently trans-shipping to Cooktown.[43]

Clearly, it is necessary in this context to differentiate between immigrants destined for Cooktown and those heading for the Palmer. It may be, therefore, that the Palmer had a higher proportion of recent immigrants from Great Britain and Ireland than did Cooktown. The figures at Table 6.1 (over) show that the combined European population of the Palmer and Hodgkinson goldfields varied across the period 1874 to 1881 from a low of 1099 to a high of 3600. Accepting that the proportion of the goldfields workforce born in the British Isles was around 54 per cent at the

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41 A number of immigrants also took advantage of the assisted-scheme offered by Queensland and used it as a convenient entry point to the southern colonies. Although the extent of remigration was also dependent upon local employment conditions, the overall loss was not of great significance: see Coghlan, *Labour and industry*, p. 1292-4.

42 *CHPRA,* 7 July 1875, p. 2.

43 An ongoing complaint by the local newspapers throughout the mid 1870s was that the government needed to do more to encourage single females to seek employment in Cooktown as domestic servants: see, for example, the editorial in *CHPRA,* 6 November 1875, p. 2. See also *CHPRA,* 6 November 1875, p. 2 noting that 'we trust that the claims of Cooktown will not be neglected by the government'.

1876 census and 40 per cent at the 1881 census,[44] it can be seen from column (d) that the British Isles-born were probably at their peak of around 1900 in 1877.

A fair percentage of that number, however, would have been resident in Queensland or one of the southern colonies for at least one year. Indeed, it seems reasonable to assume that the proportion of newly-arrived immigrants (that is, having arrived in Australia within the previous twelve months) would not have exceeded 50 per cent of the British Isles-born population in any one year. On that basis, columns (e) (f) and (g) show respectively the probable maximum number of recently-arrived immigrants from Great Britain and Ireland at the goldfields, the total number of such immigrants arriving in Queensland and the percentage of the former against the latter. The outcome suggests that less than 20 per cent (and more likely only around 10 per cent) of immigrants from Great Britain and Ireland headed for the goldfields of Far North Queensland upon their arrival in Queensland.[45]

Table 6.1 - The Estimated Number of Immigrants from Great Britain and Ireland at the Palmer River and Hodgkinson Goldfields 1874-81

Years	European Population *1	Proportion of British Isles-born at the goldfields *2	Number of British Isles-born at the goldfields *3	Number of recently-arrived British Isles-born at the goldfields *4	Number of British Isles immigrants to Qld *5	Column (e) as percentage of (f)
(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)	(g)
1874	2330	59.3%	1382	691	8854	7.8%
1875	2100	56.6%	1189	595	5871	10.1%
1876	3400	53.9%	1833	917	5540	16.5%
1877	3600	51.1%	1840	920	4834	19.0%
1878	1782	48.3%	861	431	6105	7.1%
1879	1422	45.6%	648	324	3150	10.3%
1880	1363	42.9%	585	293	3404	8.6%
1881	1099	40.2%	442	221	4289	5.2%
Average	1967	49.7%	1098	549	5256	10.5%

Notes:
1. Data derived from 'population of the goldfields' statistics in successive issues of *QVP*, 1875-82.
2. Figures for 1876 and 1881 from census statistics in *QVP*, 2, 1877, p. 505 and *QVP*, 2, 1882, p. 975. Remaining figures derived by extrapolation.
3. Calculated by multiplying column (b) by (c).
4. Derived on the basis that 50 per cent of column (d) may reasonably have arrived from their

44 See census statistics in *QVP*, 2, 1877, p. 505 and *QVP*, 2, 1882, p. 975.

45 That assessment also sits reasonably with anecdotal evidence which would seem to suggest that 'new chums' were very much in the minority: see, for example, the report in *CHPRA*, 12 December 1874, p. 3 noting the arrival of new miners who, 'judging from their heavy clothing ... [had only recently arrived in Queensland]'.

homeland within the past twelve months.
5. Data derived from 'immigration to Queensland' statistics in successive issues of *QVP,* 1875-82.

That assessment does not, nor is it meant to, refute the opening proposition that the Palmer River gold-rush attracted immigrants from Great Britain and Ireland to Queensland. Rather, it reinforces the view that the Palmer River goldfields were seen as epitomising the economic potential of Queensland, as well as the perceived improved standard of living possible within the Australian colonies. Coming on top of the Queensland Government's extremely active program of encouraging immigration, including by a range of financial inducements,[46] the Palmer River gold discoveries were probably seen by a number of prospective immigrants as the icing on an already attractive cake.

The Move to Municipal Government

Against that background, the settlement of Cooktown progressed steadily across the years 1874 and 1875 from a revenue-collecting port of access for the Palmer to a fledgling township. Such progress, however, was largely fortuitous and more the result of a burgeoning but unstructured business community than any sense of civic purpose. Indeed, the extent of civic indifference would have to rate as one of the key features of the history of early Cooktown, with *The Cooktown Herald* noting in late 1875 that

> ... it would be a source of great gratification to us if we could only discover what is the cause of the peculiar apathy that exists among the Cooktown public regarding ... [a municipality].[47]

Cooktown was not alone, though, in its indifference towards municipal affairs. The *Municipal Institutions Act of 1864,* based upon the similar New South Wales legislation of 1858, left the initiative for the incorporation of a town or rural community with its prospective

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46 See the comment by W.R. Johnston, *The call of the land: a history of Queensland to the present day,* Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1982, p. 90 that 'Queensland was the leading immigration colony in the 1870s and 1880s, mainly because the government was so actively seeking migrants and offering so many inducements'.

47 *CHPRA,* 13 October 1875, p. 2. As will be seen in the paragraphs that follow, that statement has a certain irony given that it was *The Cooktown Herald* which so strongly denounced the idea of a municipality throughout most of 1874.

ratepayers.[48] Brisbane itself, for example, had become incorporated in 1859, followed in 1860 by Rockhampton, Toowoomba and Ipswich, in 1861 by Maryborough and Warwick, in 1863 by Gladstone, Dalby and Bowen, and in the late 1860s by Mackay and Townsville. As at 1875, however, several towns with a history longer than Cooktown's, notably Gympie, Bundaberg and Charters Towers, remained unincorporated.

In Cooktown's case, its early reluctance to seek municipal status seems to have several strands. As mentioned already, many within the community appeared largely indifferent to civic advancement. In part, that probably stemmed from a well-founded scepticism that the township might not survive beyond 1874.[49] It also derived, perhaps in a related way, from the preoccupation of many residents with their business affairs, with *The Cooktown Courier* noting in late 1874 that

> ... we fear that everybody is at present too busily engaged in their private business to give any time to the public.[50]

Of those who were interested enough to consider the prospects of a municipality, three concerns were commonly voiced in any discussion of the issue. The first was that incorporation was having somewhat mixed successes elsewhere, with the insolvency of the Sydney corporation and similar problems in Brisbane and Bundaberg, in particular, frequently cited as the fate awaiting Cooktown.[51] The second concern was that incorporation would result in the immediate imposition of direct taxes on every household and business in the township, typically at the annual rate

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48 Under the legislation, the government could incorporate a municipality if it received a petition from at least 100 residents, provided a counter-petition with a greater number of signatures was not received. For a comprehensive account of the history of local government in Queensland, see J.R. Laverty, 'An historical survey of local government in Queensland' in J.D. Tucker *et al, Local government in Queensland,* Vol. 1, Australian Institute of Urban Studies, Canberra, 1981, pp. 73-104..

49 See, for example, a letter to the editor in *The Cooktown Courier,* 9 May 1874, p. 3 suggesting the issue of business licences rather than land sales, at least 'until we see whether southern prognostication of Cooktown being abandoned within a few months is verified'.

50 *The Cooktown Courier,* 31 October 1874, p. 3.

51 An editorial in *The Cooktown Courier,* 18 July 1874, p. 3, for example, asserted that 'the examples of Sydney, Brisbane and Maryborough do not prejudice us in favour of mayors and aldermen'.

of one shilling in the pound on the assessed value of every property.[52] *The Cooktown Herald* in July 1874 warned its readers that

> ... under municipal government, every store, house, [and] poor men's humpy ... will all be taxed to carry on - what we consider would be a white elephant - the Cooktown Corporation.[53]

The third and undoubtedly the main concern was the perception that incorporation would allow the government to abrogate its financial responsibilities towards the township.[54] In this regard, Cooktown was not alone in its suspicion that one of the aims of colonial administrations in encouraging the devolution of government to the local level was 'to divest themselves of the trivia of troublesome local works and services'.[55] Certainly, *The Cooktown Herald* was of the view that

> ... the government would be only too glad to throw us on our own hook as it would relieve them of considerable anxiety and much expense.[56]

In reality, the intention under both the *Municipal Institutions Act of 1864* and the *Local Government Act of 1878* (and the *Divisional Boards Act of 1879*) was that the functions and powers of municipal authorities would be limited strictly to local works and services, and that they would not, for example, be responsible for education or police, although they would

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52 The other major source of income, conveniently overlooked by municipal critics, was that the government would pay a subsidy or 'endowment' of rate revenue for the first fifteen years (diminishing in five-yearly intervals): see Laverty, 'An historical survey', p. 76. The *Municipalities Act of 1861* also granted councils an endowment of half of the proceeds of the sale of crown land within the municipality (subsequently abolished by the *Municipal Endowments Act of 1876,* but replaced with a more generous general rate endowment). For a more detailed discussion of local government legislation, see G. Greenwood and J.R. Laverty (eds.), *Brisbane 1859-1959: a history of local government,* Brisbane City Council, Brisbane, 1959 and J.R. Laverty, 'The History of Municipal Government in Brisbane 1859-1925', PhD thesis, University of Queensland, 1968.

53 *CHPRA,* 8 July 1874, p. 3.

54 Largely because of the failure of the 'voluntary' method of incorporation, no doubt partly because of this concern, the Queensland government introduced legislation, namely the *Local Government Act of 1878* and the *Divisional Boards Act of 1879,* which widened both the scope and appeal of local government, but also did away with the voluntary principle of incorporation: see Laverty, 'An historical survey', p. 79.

55 See Laverty, 'An historical survey', p. 74 noting also that 'colonial governments also saw ... [it] as a means of limiting the operation of the notorious roads and bridges Member'.

56 *CHPRA,* 8 July 1874, p. 3.

be required to appoint a local board of health and meet the expenses it incurred.[57] For the business community of Cooktown, with its trading links to the Palmer vitally dependent on road communications, the prospect that local authorities might be made responsible for the funding and upkeep of roads and bridges to the Palmer was not an attractive proposition.[58]

Throughout most of 1874, therefore, *The Cooktown Herald* — as the *defacto* mouthpiece of the business community — vociferously denounced calls by the more civic-minded *The Cooktown Courier* for the formation of a municipality. *The Cooktown Herald's* suggestion, based loosely on the experiences of Melbourne in the 1850s, was for a 'committee of improvement', which would pass resolutions to a yet-to-be-appointed local member for presentation to parliament.[59] In the view of *The Cooktown Herald*

> ... we shall obtain more attention from the government by aid of an Improvement Committee than we ever would under a municipality.[60]

By late 1874, however, *The Cooktown Herald* was changing its tune. That presumably was because the experience of the first year of settlement, in terms of the allocation of government expenditure, had led many residents to believe that the Government's only real interest in Cooktown related to the collection of revenue.[61] In December 1874, *The Cooktown Herald* rather cautiously contended that

> ... [a]lthough municipalities have not been very successful in Queensland, we believe now if we

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57 See Laverty, 'An historical survey', pp. 75 and 78.

58 Another issue, which was to become a real bone of contention over the years to follow, was that the Cooktown hospital serviced the entire Cook District, including the Palmer River goldfields. Under local government devolution, the authorities in Cooktown would become responsible for the costs of treating infectious disease patients (if the area was 'declared' under the relevant Health Act), while other treatment would be funded by public subscriptions and an associated government subsidy. See, for example, the discussion in Greenwood and Laverty, *Brisbane 1859-1959,* pp. 232-7.

59 See the discussion in *CHPRA,* 29 July 1874, p. 2 noting that in Melbourne, the rapid progress in public works development 'was brought about by the energetic action of private individuals acting on the government'.

60 *CHPRA,* 8 July 1874, p. 3.

61 See, for example, the editorial in *CHPRA,* 25 November 1874, p. 2 asserting that '[t]he government have done nothing for us .... [They are] [a]nxious only to collect the revenue of the town'.

> had one in Cooktown it would be better for the inhabitants.[62]

What also seems to have been emerging within the community at about that time was an appreciation that the business community's focus on its trading links with the Palmer was proving to be somewhat at the expense of public works and services in Cooktown. During the visit by the Colonial Treasurer in October 1874, for example, a deputation of residents — mainly businessmen — raised such issues as an upgraded road to the Palmer, the connection of the telegraph line *via* the goldfields, the extension of the wharves in Cooktown and a plea to reduce the gold escort fee to six-pence per ounce.[63] By late 1875, though, residents of the town were bemoaning the fact that they still had no fire brigade, their side streets were still unsurfaced, there was no system of drainage in the town and the general standard of health continued to be jeopardised by the lack of fresh water.[64]

The year 1875, therefore, saw both local newspapers progressively canvassing support for a municipality. Increasingly also, editorials began to highlight what they saw as the widening gap between the revenue generated by the town and the expenditure allocated to the district by government.[65] Although its views are not specifically recorded, the business community had presumably come to the view that its interests would similarly best be served by decisions on civic infrastructure and services being made at the local level. In what was a complete turn-around from a year earlier, the business community's faltering standard-bearer announced in late 1875 that

> ... the formation of a Municipality will do more to advance the true interests of Cooktown in a year than could have been hoped for from the govern-men in five.[66]

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62 *CHPRA,* 9 December 1874, p. 2.

63 See the report of discussions in *The Cooktown Courier,* 17 October 1874, p. 4. The need for a time gun for example, rated ninth on a list of fourteen items, with a water supply for the town at number thirteen.

64 See the editorial in *The Cooktown Courier,* 20 October 1875, p. 2.

65 A not infrequent theme was also that, in the absence of municipal status, the proceeds of all land sales were going directly to the government: see, for example, *CHPRA,* 10 February 1875, p. 2 and *The Cooktown Courier,* 21 July 1875, p. 3.

66 *CHPRA,* 25 December 1875, p. 2.

In a further irony, it was the editor of *The Cooktown Herald,* W.H.L. Bailey, who was the co-organiser in late October 1875 of the petition seeking the town's incorporation as a municipality.[67] Within the space of several days, the petition had the necessary minimum of 100 signatures (of prospective ratepayers) and was forwarded to the Executive Council,[68] with *The Cooktown Courier* noting on 20 November 'no counter-petition in hand'.[69] The reasonable expectation would have been that, barring unforeseen complications, Cooktown would be proclaimed a municipality three months after the petition's receipt by the Executive Council.

In the event, Cooktown was not proclaimed a municipality until 3 April 1876.[70] In the interim, Cooktown seems once again to have lapsed into civic inactivity. *The Cooktown Courier,* clearly conscious that aldermanic elections would need to be held within three months of the date of proclamation, attempted in January 1876 to arouse public interest in the town's imminent elevation to municipal status.[71] Two months later, with almost a touch of despair, *The Cooktown Courier* noted that

> it is about time that some stir was made as to who would be the most fit and proper nine persons to commit our destiny to.[72]

Eventually, and seemingly prompted by the Police Magistrate in his capacity as Returning Officer, council elections were set for Monday 5 June 1876. Three weeks beforehand, with the closing date for the nomination of candidates imminent, *The Cooktown Herald* noted that 'very little signs of interest are manifest'.[73] By the due date, nineteen residents of

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67 The other co-organiser was Henry Milford, a solicitor: see *CHPRA,* 27 October 1875, p. 2.

68 An editorial in *CHPRA,* 27 October 1875, p. 2 noted that 'without the slightest trouble ... [the organisers] obtained one hundred and thirty-five of the most influential signatures in town'.

69 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 20 November 1875, p. 2. As mentioned previously, the petition could be negated by a counter-petition signed by more individuals.

70 See *Queensland Government Gazette,* Vol. 18, 1876, p. 768. The delay presumably was simply the result of minor administrative hold-ups over the Christmas/New Year period.

71 *The Cooktown Courier,* 14 January 1876, p. 2.

72 *The Cooktown Courier,* 4 March 1876, p. 2.

73 *CHPRA,* 17 May 1876, p. 2. Under Part 3 Section 15 of the Act, candidates were not required to lodge a deposit but needed to be nominated by five eligible voters, as well as providing a written statement to the returning officer signifying their willingness to serve if elected.

Cooktown had nominated for the nine positions available; all bar one were merchants or tradesmen, the one exception being a solicitor.[74] Under the electoral regulations, the nineteen names were listed alphabetically on the ballot paper, with electors required to mark their nine preferences by scoring out ten other names.[75]

On the day of the elections, it seems that only about seventy-five electors (from a resident population of around 2200) cast their vote.[76] All the winning candidates received more than forty-two individual votes.[77] The Returning Officer, Howard St George, caused something of a stir by refusing to accept the votes of an unrecorded but significant number of residents, on the basis that they were not duly registered on the electoral roll. At the official declaration ceremony, Howard St George publicly regretted that he had been obliged to refuse so many votes but explained that

> ... it was the Act, which had compelled him to do so [and that] he was not accountable for the stringency of that Act.[78]

In the months that followed, Cooktown's municipal affairs stumbled often and made particularly rocky progress.[79] As has been discussed in earlier chapters, the bitter rivalry between the Town Clerk and the aspiring alderman William Simpson led not frequently to council meetings in late 1876 and early 1877 ending in uproar.[80] More generally, council affairs were plagued by mismanagement, occasional suspicions of embezzlement and some questionable public works priorities. In early 1879, *The Cooktown Courier* — in an editorial critical of Alderman Hodel for having authorised the employment of labourers on roadworks about the

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74 See *CHPRA,* 3 June 1876, p. 2.

75 The instructions for voting were published in both local newspapers. *The Cooktown Herald,* in commenting on the requirement to score out ten names, noted that 'a mistake here will be fatal': see *CHPRA,* 3 June 1876, p. 2.

76 Derived by dividing the total votes cast (664) by nine, and allowing for a small number of informal votes: see the poll results in *CHPRA,* 7 June 1876, p. 2.

77 A notable loser was William Simpson who, as discussed in Chapter 5, was later to prove extremely disruptive to Council proceedings.

78 See *CHPRA,* 7 June 1876, p. 2 noting that 'many were consequently disfranchised who really had the required qualifications'.

79 The financial affairs of the council between 1876 and 1885 are addressed in more detail in Chapter 7.

80 See the discussion under the heading 'Community Interest in Civic Affairs' in Chapter 4.

town, without the approval of council and without there being funds available to pay them — lamented that

> [t]he Municipal Council of this town has rendered itself famous among the municipalities of Queensland for doing some of the most extraordinary things that could possibly be conceived.[81]

Certainly, one of the most contentious issues in Cooktown's municipal affairs in the late 1870s was the relative priorities afforded to street formation over public health. The view of the business community seems to have been that well-surfaced streets, with properly-constructed kerbs and gutters were important in presenting to prospective residents a favourable image of Cooktown as a place to settle or transact business.[82] The view of the 'man in the street', as championed by *The Cooktown Courier,* in its repeated calls for a permanent water supply, was that

> ... [we] are decidedly inclined to prefer the spectacle of a sound, healthy man stumbling along a rough street, to watching a string of coffins borne noiselessly over the most splendidly made roadway in Queensland.[83]

Another vexed but less contentious issue related to the steadily growing Chinese population in the town.[84] Item three on the agenda of the first working meeting of the new council, for example, was a notice of motion to the effect that 'every Chinaman not legitimately engaged in business shall be removed without the Municipal boundary'.[85] In the event, the motion never came to a vote. Nevertheless, the first three by-laws passed by the council in July 1876 were regulations to prevent Chinese market-gardeners and water carriers from encroaching upon or befouling

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81 *The Cooktown Courier,* 11 January 1879, p. 3. By that time, the government had introduced the *Local Government Act of 1878,* which empowered the government to annex neighbouring areas to a municipality. It was not until the following year that the *Divisional Boards Act of 1879* compulsorily instituted local government throughout Queensland. For a useful discussion of the expansion and consolidation of local government from 1878, see Laverty, 'An historical survey', p. 79.

82 At the first working meeting of the new council, for example, the first item on the agenda was 'upgrading the main street': see *The Cooktown Courier,* 24 June 1876, p. 3.

83 *The Cooktown Courier,* 27 September 1876, p. 2.

84 The issue of Chinese immigration, not only to Cooktown but also in terms of its impact on Queensland, is discussed in Chapter 7.

85 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 24 June 1876, p. 3.

the town's water supplies, to prohibit Chinese hawkers and fishermen from working on the Sabbath, and to make Chinese dwellings and market-gardens rateable even if not situated on town allotments.[86]

Beyond those two main issues, much of the focus of the municipal council in its early years was on obtaining a fair share of the works and services expenditure allocated by the government in Brisbane. In that regard, the council soon found itself in competition with the Cooktown Progress Association, which had been formed in early 1877 'to consider only such subjects as are beyond the province of the Council'.[87] In reality, the Progress Association had been formed by disgruntled residents and business men in an attempt to usurp the function of the council in representing the interests of the town to Brisbane.[88]

As it turned out, the influence of the Progress Association was short-lived, seemingly because the Cooktown public had the maturity to realise that

> ... in a small community ... two bodies, professing the same creed ... is like a house divided against itself, which cannot stand.[89]

For Cooktown's critics in Brisbane, though, the rivalry between the two organisations would have reinforced their views of a town disunited and unlikely ever to develop into a cohesive community. Ostensibly, however, the problem of competing voices was about to be remedied by the Government's widening of parliamentary representation to include the newly-formed district of Cook.[90]

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86 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 15 July 1876, p. 3.

87 See the aims as reported in *The Cooktown Courier,* 30 May 1877, p. 3.

88 In a scathing attack on the leading figures within the association, after they had presented themselves as a deputation to the visiting Attorney-General in January 1877, *The Cooktown Herald* asserted that 'they exhibited an amount of arrogance and cheek unprecedented in the annals of Australian history': *CHPRA,* 13 January 1877, p. 3.

89 See the editorial in *CHPRA,* 4 July 1877, p. 2. See also *The Cooktown Courier,* 27 June 1877, p. 3 noting that 'public support to the Progress Association has been meagre in the extreme'.

90 The district boundaries encompassed Cooktown, the settlements at Normanby River, Laura and Maytown, and the Palmer River and Hodgkinson goldfields.

Parliamentary Representation for Cooktown and the Palmer

A motion recommending the appointment of a local member for Cooktown and the Palmer River goldfields was tabled in Parliament by W. Hodgkinson, member for the Burke district, on 11 June 1874.[91] The motion was carried but appropriate legislation was not presented to Parliament until the June session of 1875, provoking *The Cooktown Herald* to complain that

> ... a little place like Ravenswood ... now has a member to represent it .... It is monstrous that the district of Palmer and Cook, containing a population of at least 5000 whites should be left without a representative.[92]

The concern of both *The Cooktown Herald* and *The Cooktown Courier* was that, without a local member, Cooktown would have to continue representing its views to Parliament *via* petitions and deputations, and during visits to the town by government ministers and officials. The specific concern was that those avenues of representation had not proved effective in the past. Moreover, all three provided considerable scope for exacerbating disunity and divisions within the Cooktown community.

In April 1874, for example, one of the town's more civic-minded citizens, William Pocock, had raised the issue of land improvements with the Under-Secretary of Works, during a private visit to Brisbane.[93] His action was promptly denounced by a public meeting in Cooktown, on the basis that he had no authority to represent the views of the community and, indeed, that the view he espoused was not shared by the community-at-large.[94] William Simpson, in typically aggressive fashion, also took umbrage that the Under-Secretary had even consented to receive the 'deputation', contending that

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91 See *QVP*, 1, 1874, p. 278.

92 See the editorial in *CHPRA*, 12 December 1874, p. 2.

93 William Pocock raised with the Under-Secretary the issue of whether the government intended to make some provision in the forthcoming land sale to compensate individuals for the cost of improvements erected on building allotments about to be auctioned: see the editorial discussion in *CHPRA*, 8 April 1874, p. 3.

94 Pocock's recommendation was that any improvements valued at £50 or more should be compensated. The view of the majority at the public meeting was that any improvements, regardless of value, should be compensated: see *CHPRA*, 22 April 1874, p. 3.

> I object to any public officer allowing himself to be made the tool of a class that forms itself into deputations.[95]

A number of other deputations, supposedly representative of the Cooktown community, met with similar outrage. In January 1877, a deputation of 'leading citizens' presented itself to the visiting Attorney-General with a string of recommendations and priorities for public works and services in the town, which flew in the face of the list being presented by the recently-established municipal council.[96] *The Cooktown Herald* slammed the 'unofficial' list as 'not worth the paper they are written on',[97] while *The Cooktown Courier* — agreeing that the unofficial deputation 'was improperly organised' — lamented that

> the want of unity and united action is the most fatal grievance in this community at the present time.[98]

Visits to Cooktown by government ministers and officials were also viewed with a healthy degree of scepticism by the community-at-large. The civic reception for the visiting Attorney-General in January 1877, for example, was a select gathering of only seventeen, which *The Cooktown Herald* noted comprised 'six officials, three lessees of *The Cooktown Courier* and eight citizens'.[99] Many of the promises and utterances of visiting politicians and officials also failed to materialise once they returned to Brisbane.[100] Conversely, visiting parliamentarians and officials would often talk only in generalities during their brief stay, usually excusing their lack of commitment on the basis of their not wanting to intrude on the responsibilities of another minister or department. After the visit by the Minister for Works in December 1875, *The Cooktown Herald* opined that

> ... we think that the Cooktown citizens should have received some more tangible pledge ... than was afforded by the vague generalities

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95 Letter to the editor in *The Cooktown Courier,* 18 April 1874, p. 3.

96 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 17 January 1877, p. 2.

97 *CHPRA,* 13 January 1877, p. 2.

98 *The Cooktown Courier,* 17 January 1877, p. 2.

99 *CHPRA,* 17 January 1877, p. 2.

100 Several months after the visit by the Colonial Treasurer and Postmaster-General, for example, *The Cooktown Courier,* 13 April 1878, p. 2 noted that 'many matters promised by the Ministers ... remain in abeyance'.

that made up his Cooktown deliverances.[101]

Against that background, the news in July 1875 that approval had been given for parliamentary representation for the district was greeted in Cooktown as 'tardy justice'.[102] The sense of relief was somewhat short-lived when it became apparent that finding a suitable local member might not be easy.[103] In part, that was because members of parliament at that time were unpaid, effectively ensuring that the only candidates were likely to be 'gentlemen of position'.[104] The added difficulty was that most of the eligible candidates in Cooktown were pre-occupied with their business interests, with *The Cooktown Herald* noting that

> ... we are quite certain that none of ... our merchants and professional men ... would feel inclined to abandon the more substantial gains of their several callings for the fleeting honor [sic] and problematic advantage of a seat in the Assembly.[105]

Almost by default, therefore, the mantle of preferred candidate settled 'on some gentleman astride the constituency', namely in the person of William Murphy, a Brisbane-based solicitor who had stood unsuccessfully in previous Assembly elections.[106] By late March 1876, two months before the scheduled elections, *The Cooktown Courier* noted that 'we seem to be dwindling down to but few aspirants' and that 'Mr Murphy will have a quiet walk over'.[107] At the last moment, John Jones, a Cooktown-based auctioneer threw his hat into the ring, allegedly backed by a clique opposed to the Cooktown-based interests behind William Murphy.[108] In the event, Murphy defeated Jones by seventy-three votes, 350 to 277.[109]

Once in office, Murphy proved an utter disappointment to the majority of his constituents. Probably the major criticism of his

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101 *CHPRA,* 4 December 1875, p. 2.
102 *CHPRA,* 7 July 1875, p. 2.
103 In late 1875, *The Cooktown Courier,* 22 December 1875, p. 2 noted that '[still] no-one before the constituency'.
104 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 30 October 1875, p. 2.
105 *CHPRA,* 22 December 1875, p. 2.
106 *CHPRA,* 22 December 1875, p. 2.
107 *The Cooktown Courier,* 22 March 1876, p. 2.
108 See the editorial in *CHPRA,* 3 June 1876, p. 2.
109 From the returns as published in *CHPRA,* 3 June 1876, p. 2.

performance was that he not only knew very little about the district, but made practically no attempt to improve his knowledge or take into account the various issues confronting his constituents.[110] *The Cooktown Herald* in late 1876, only six months after Murphy's election to office, contended that 'he has evidently no sympathy with anything one mile beyond the boundary of Brisbane',[111] while *The Cooktown Courier* (with a smug sense of hindsight) asserted in January 1877 that

> Murphy ... knows nothing about this district ... and when electors chose so complete a stranger to represent them, they ought to have foreseen the result.[112]

The second criticism of Murphy was that he consistently failed to act upon representations put to him by his constituents. In October 1876, the president of the Cooktown hospital committee, Callaghan Walsh, felt obliged to lead a private deputation to Brisbane, to plead for additional funding, because 'our member does not bother himself about it'.[113] Similarly, the mayor of Cooktown, Hector Menzies, at a public meeting in April 1878, said that

> ... he regretted that the district was not better represented in Parliament. Had Mr Murphy done his duty, he would have seen that his constituents were not neglected.[114]

A somewhat back-handed compliment was an editorial in *The Brisbane Courier* of early February 1877 complaining that Murphy 'always had motions on the paper for something for Cook' and that '[m]embers on both sides of the House protested against his never-ceasing demands'.[115] Although that view seems at odds with the criticisms from his detractors in Cooktown — and is not obvious from a cursory analysis of parliamentary proceedings — a possible explanation may relate to the fact that Murphy not infrequently tabled requests before the House seemingly of his own

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110 From the available records, it seems that Murphy made only one brief visit to Cooktown during his three years of office: see *CHPRA,* 20 May 1876, p. 2.

111 *CHPRA,* 25 November 1876, p. 2.

112 *The Cooktown Courier,* 3 January 1877, p. 3.

113 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 28 October 1876, p. 2.

114 As quoted in *The Cooktown Courier,* 27 April 1878, p. 3.

115 As reproduced in *The Cooktown Courier,* 7 February 1877, p. 3.

volition or in response to the representations of minority interests within the district.

In September 1876, for example, and only three months into his term of office, Murphy put in a bid to the parliamentary loan estimates committee for £3000 for a railway survey from Cooktown to the Palmer.[116] The request had not come from the Cooktown council, which subsequently expressed concern at the idea, with one aldermen questioning 'what was the good of ... a railway survey while the town was perishing for want of water?'.[117] Similar opposition came from *The Cooktown Courier,* with an editorial expressing concern that 'the cost will be to the detriment of our roads'.[118]

The obvious question would seem to be who were the minority but influential interests pushing for a railway survey? One likely possibility is that they were part of the same Cooktown-based business clique which was allegedly behind Murphy's initial endorsement. According to an editorial in *The Cooktown Herald,* that clique centred on two prominent Cooktown businessmen, James Baird and Frederick Beardmore, both import agents and auctioneers, whose businesses were heavily reliant on trade with the Palmer.[119] The implications are that even after Cooktown achieved representation at the parliamentary level, the broader interests of the town continued to be jeopardised by disparate and competing voices.

The other dimension which came to impact on parliamentary representation for Cooktown in the late 1870s was the emergence of a 'Northern party', pledged to secure a more equitable distribution of government resources for North Queensland. In the December 1878 elections, the Cook district, under electoral redistribution legislation of 1877, returned two members both committed to the policies of a 'northern

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116 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 27 September 1876, p. 2 and *QVP,* 1, 1877, p. 167.

117 As reported in *The Cooktown Courier,* 30 September 1876, p. 3.

118 *The Cooktown Courier,* 27 September 1876, p. 2. *The Cooktown Herald,* still the *defacto* mouthpiece of business interests generally, gave qualified support to the proposal on the basis that '[Murphy] is obviously up with the times ... [and] knows our wants are similar [to those elsewhere]': *CHPRA,* 23 September 1876, p. 2.

119 See *CHPRA,* 3 June 1876, p. 2.

compact'.[120] Differing stances on the issues of northern separation, Chinese immigration, and expenditure on public works and services, however, quickly led to fractures within the compact and saw Cooktown increasingly at odds with its northern neighbours. For a short while at least, though, some of the interests of Cooktown and the Palmer were knowingly subordinated to the 'greater good' of Northern solidarity.

An Equitable Share of Government Resources

For the residents of Cooktown, their probable first indication of the likely battle ahead for a fair share of government expenditure on public works and services came in May 1874, when the published parliamentary loan estimates for 1875 omitted any mention of Cooktown. Although the more civic-minded citizens were somewhat affronted by Premier Macalister's assertion that he was prepared to spend money 'as soon as the place gave indications of its permanency', the general view of the Cooktown community seemed to be that the Government would ultimately 'do the right thing' by the town.[121]

Two months later, local newspapers were still couching their editorial comments towards the Government in amicable terms. *The Cooktown Courier* in late June 1874, for example, prefaced its plea for more to be done on the roads with the acknowledgment that 'no doubt the government have acted very fairly by us, all things considered'.[122] It also seems that business and civic leaders, conscious of the competing claims of other coastal settlements to be considered as the access point for the Palmer, were loath to jeopardise Cooktown's claims by placing unwanted demands on the Government.[123]

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120 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 4 December 1878, p. 2. The members were John Walsh and F.A. Cooper. William Murphy did not seek re-election, claiming that he was making a stand against the government's position in allowing the introduction of Chinese to Queensland: see his statement in *The Cooktown Courier,* 12 October 1878, p. 2.

121 See the discussion in *CHPRA,* 13 May 1874, p. 3.

122 *The Cooktown Courier,* 20 June 1874, p. 3.

123 See the editorial in *The Cooktown Courier,* 4 July 1874, p. 2 prefacing its support for the establishment of a district court with the comment that 'we are not inclined to urge our wants on the attention of the government with too much pertinacity or in too great haste'.

From about July 1874 onwards, however, the mood in Cooktown became less conciliatory and, indeed, tinged with cynicism over what was seen as the Government's readiness to exploit the collection of revenue through the port, with little return in the form of civic expenditure. An editorial in *The Cooktown Courier* of early July 1874 noted that the Government had been quick to appoint a collector of customs and sell land, but 'they have not shown a corresponding zeal in carrying out public works'.[124] Two weeks later, another editorial picked up the theme — which was to become central to the community's perceived sense of injustice in the years to follow — that the Government was callously 'making the most they could out of the townspeople'.[125]

The move to municipal government, therefore, as well as parliamentary representation for the district, clearly need to be seen in the context of the community's attempt to secure a better deal for Cooktown and the Palmer from the authorities in Brisbane. News of the approval for a local member, for example, was greeted by *The Cooktown Courier* with the expectation that

> ... now we have the means ... of securing that
> share of public consideration and expenditure
> to which we are justly entitled.[126]

What the community saw as its priorities for government spending was far less clear. As discussed previously, there were competing demands between those who saw the first priority as road communications to the Palmer, against those arguing for road formation within Cooktown. There were also those who saw the priority as a water supply for the town, as well as other infrastructure relating to drainage and sanitation. In the years between 1874 and 1877, however, when the Palmer River goldfields were at their peak, the state of the roads between Cooktown and the Palmer was obviously critical to the economic viability of both locations. *The Cooktown Herald's* call, therefore, in March 1874 for the formation of a good dray road to the Palmer as 'one if not the most important matter to all' was probably well-founded.[127]

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124 *The Cooktown Courier,* 4 July 1874, p. 2.
125 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 18 July 1874, p. 3.
126 *The Cooktown Courier,* 12 January 1876, p. 2.
127 *CHPRA,* 25 March 1874, p. 2.

It is also evident that the road between Cooktown and the Palmer was often in a far worse state than officials in Brisbane could ever imagine, notwithstanding that several thousand pounds had been spent on 'district' roads by June 1875 (see Table 6.2 at page 303). In April 1874, when the road was little more than a track, five horses were reportedly stuck in one bogged section 'so bad that men find it next to impossible to ... even relieve them of their packs'.[128] In March 1877, after several thousand pounds had been spent upgrading the road, several teams were reportedly bogged on the approaches to Maytown, with the expectation being that the wagons 'are likely to remain in the same condition for many weeks to come'.[129] A year later, the mail coach running between Cooktown and the Palmer capsized on the way up breaking one of its wheels, had great difficulty crossing the Normanby River and capsized again on the way down.[130]

Under such conditions, it is perhaps understandable that carriers had little compunction in charging what seemed to be exorbitant rates of carriage between Cooktown and the Palmer.[131] Certainly, some carriers would have exploited the situation to their advantage. At times, however, the state of the roads all but precluded the carriage of goods, resulting in severe shortages on the goldfields and 'crushing prices [being] charged for the absolute necessaries'.[132] A not infrequent outcome was that hundreds of European miners, 'broken in spirit and in constitution, left the district never to return'.[133] Many of the ongoing calls for additional funding for the Cooktown-Palmer road, therefore, need to be seen against that background, where business and civic leaders in Cooktown perceived that continuing problems of accessibility — particularly for goods and reef-drilling machinery — would eventually stifle the Palmer's long-term prospects.

Militating against their demands for further funds, though, were several factors. The first was that a sizeable proportion of the initial funding for the Cooktown-Palmer road was wasted on a route, surveyed by A.C. Macmillan, which detoured unnecessarily 'more than 100 miles among

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128 *CHPRA,* 22 April 1874, p. 3.

129 *CHPRA,* 14 March 1877, p. 2.

130 *The Cooktown Courier,* 1 May 1878, p. 3.

131 Costs varied from a high of £200 per ton in the wet season of February 1874 to £70 a ton in 1875: see, for example, W.H. Corfield, *Reminiscences of Queensland 1862-1899,* Frater, Brisbane, 1921, p. 51.

132 See the editorial discussion in *The Cooktown Courier,* 21 November 1874, p. 3.

133 *The Cooktown Courier,* 21 November 1874, p. 3.

swamps and sandhills'.[134] Indeed, no sooner was the road opened than eighty kilometres of it was abandoned in favour of a shorter route, surveyed by Sub-Inspector Douglas.[135] The second factor was that the business interests in Cooktown calling for an improved road to the Palmer were competing for funds with those in Cooktown supporting a railway line to the goldfields which, by some accounts, would do away with the need for a road.[136] It was understandable, therefore, that those controlling the purse-strings in Brisbane would have some hesitation in responding too liberally to the persistent calls to spend more money on the Cooktown-Palmer road.

On several other issues, however, the people of Cooktown felt that they were being done an injustice by the authorities in Brisbane. In relation to the hospital, for example, the Cooktown community claimed that it consistently received less government funding than hospitals elsewhere treating a similar number of patients each year.[137] The fact that the majority of Cooktown's patients were from the Palmer River or Hodgkinson goldfields, and included a sizeable proportion of Chinese, was reasonably seen by the Cooktown administrators as 'a burden ... for which we should receive an extra consideration from the government'.[138] In the event, the Government was not particularly forthcoming, while the problem progressively diminished with the demise of the goldfields.[139]

The residents of early Cooktown felt themselves similarly slighted over the mail service to the town, an issue which seemed to take up an inordinate amount of editorial space in local newspapers in 1874 and 1875.

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134 See *CHPRA,* 10 October 1874, p. 2 asserting that '[a] large sum of money has been spent ... and wasted'. See also *CHPRA,* 24 October 1874, p. 2 noting that Mr Macmillan [the surveyor of the original road and subsequently the officer-in-charge of the road-works party] has pinned his faith to the original road and will not depart from it, come what may'.

135 See *CHPRA,* 10 October 1874, p. 2.

136 See the report of the meeting of railway supporters in *The Cooktown Courier,* 27 April 1878, p. 3. See also William Murphy speaking in Parliament to his proposal for a railway survey, asserting that 'it would not be long before railways superseded ordinary roads altogether': *QPD,* 20, 1876, p. 1396.

137 See the discussion, for example, in *The Cooktown Courier,* 6 December 1876, p. 3 comparing the patient statistics of the colony's hospitals and concluding that 'Cooktown ought to have received £1200 instead of £800 voted'. But note the earlier comment, at footnote 58 on page 282, differentiating between the costs to be borne by local authorities, public subscription and government subsidy.

138 See the editorial in *The Cooktown Courier,* 3 November 1875, p. 2.

139 As mentioned previously, Chinese merchants in Cooktown were particularly generous in their donations towards the upkeep of the hospital and, indeed, at one stage offered to construct and run a separate hospital for Chinese.

The crux of their complaint was that no sooner had the township been provided with a weekly mail service to the south than the authorities in Brisbane cut it back to a fortnightly run.[140] The reason for the reduced service was that the authorities had renegotiated the mail service contract — without discussing it with Cooktown — and had effected a supposed savings of £5000 per year by cutting Cooktown (and presumably some other intermediate ports) back to a fortnightly visit.[141]

What irked the residents of Cooktown was that Gympie, which they considered their equal, had been accorded a bi-weekly mail service within the first year of the discovery of gold there.[142] What irked even more was that the ship providing the northern mail service steamed passed Cooktown each week on its way to Torres Straits ports, but was only permitted to stop in Cooktown on every other trip.[143]

The lease of the Cooktown wharves was a situation which — to the municipal council at least — similarly smacked of favouritism and government injustice. The wharves had been constructed with government funding in 1874 and then leased by open tender to business interests in the town, with the proceeds going to the government. With the incorporation of the town in 1876, the municipal council requested that the lease proceeds be paid instead to the council.[144] That request was declined by the authorities on the seemingly reasonable basis that the Government wanted to retain control of the assets, with a view to keeping the wharves and their approaches in good repair.[145] Two years later, however, the Government conceded to the Mackay municipal council, reportedly in identical circumstances, the revenue from the lease of their wharves having, in the meantime, done nothing towards the upkeep of the wharves in Cooktown.[146]

Residents of Cooktown were equally miffed that even after some fifteen months of settlement, the Government was still declining to extend

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140 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 10 October 1874, p. 2.

141 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 8 April 1876, p. 2 for the explanation offered by the visiting Post-master-General.

142 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 10 October 1874, p. 2.

143 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 17 October 1874, p. 2.

144 *The Cooktown Courier,* 18 October 1876, p. 2.

145 See the editorial discussion in *The Cooktown Courier,* 31 August 1878, p. 2.

146 *The Cooktown Courier,* 31 August 1878, p. 2.

to the township the jurisdiction of the district court in civil cases, necessitating the referral to Townsville of any case in which the sum claimed exceeded £30.[147] Cooktown was also unable to get any government funding assistance for the maintenance of its cemetery, notwithstanding that many of the individuals buried there had died at the Cooktown hospital having come from the Palmer River. *The Cooktown Courier* noted that

> ... no other [place] in Australia numbers amongst its dead so many from the most distant parts of the world.[148]

Throughout the late 1870s, Cooktown was also unable to convince the authorities in Brisbane to send any of the newly-arriving immigrants from Great Britain and Ireland to the town, despite the assurances of business and civic leaders that married couples and single females would quickly find gainful employment.[149] Although it is not recorded, the view of the authorities was presumably that other towns in Queensland had a higher priority than Cooktown as prospective centres of settlement.

Indeed, successive governments throughout the 1870s did the barest minimum to facilitate or encourage any form of settlement in Cooktown, let alone as it related to the settlement there of Chinese.[150] In April 1877, for example, government officials ordered a total of some 2,500 Chinese arrivals into quarantine on Fitzroy Island — a barren outcrop some eight kilometres from Cooktown — as a precaution against smallpox. During their several weeks of enforced stay on the island, at the height of the wet season, the Government provided them with no facilities, other than a boatload of timber and tents for about one third their number.[151] *The Cooktown Herald* noted that

> ... not a single preparation in the way of building, clearing the ground, laying it out in cantonments or other preparations has [sic] been made'. [It] is a striking

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147 See the editorial discussion in *The Cooktown Courier,* 5 December 1874, p. 2.

148 *The Cooktown Courier,* 8 August 1877, p. 3.

149 *The Cooktown Courier,* 4 September 1878, p. 2.

150 The issue of Chinese immigration is addressed separately in Chapter 7.

151 The captain of one of the ships involved, *Galley of Lorne,* had earlier threatened to disembark his Chinese passengers at Cooktown in defiance of the authorities, reportedly through 'motives of humanity': see the editorial in *CHPRA,* 21 April 1877, p. 2.

example of "man's inhumanity to man".[152]

The residents of Cooktown also considered that the authorities in Brisbane treated the town rather poorly in relation to the competition between it and Cairns, Port Douglas, Townsville and Cardwell. It may well have been that an objective study would have shown that each of those towns had a more sustainable future than Cooktown, or that Cairns, for example, was better situated as the point of access and market outlet for the Hodgkinson goldfields than Cooktown.[153] Many of the decisions made in the mid to late 1870s regarding those towns, though, seem to have been based on the personal whims of ministers or in response to the lobbying of vested interests.[154] Moreover, many important decisions were taken with effectively no public input or debate, and no prior consultation with the local authorities likely to be affected by the decisions.

The arbitrary announcement by the Government in April 1877, for example, that it intended to re-route the Palmer River gold escort *via* the Hodgkinson to Cairns, was accordingly greeted with dismay and disbelief by residents in Cooktown.[155] Their concern was not only that Cooktown would lose the credit for gold exported through the port, but that the move would undermine the nexus between Cooktown and the Palmer River goldfields in the minds of potential investors and businessmen.

In the absence of a study or debate which may well have shown that it made economic sense to divert the escort to Cairns, rumours abounded in Cooktown attributing a range of motives to the Government. They included that the Attorney-General had bought land at Cairns and that the authorities were hoping to push up bids at the forthcoming land sales in Cairns.[156] Eventually, the Government decided not to proceed with

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152 *CHPRA,* 21 April 1877, p. 2. It was also not the case that this was some unforeseen exigency, given that the first serious smallpox scare arose in December 1876 and that discussion on a suitable quarantine station had been ongoing since that time: see, for example, *The Cooktown Courier,* 10 January 1877, p. 3.

153 One of the matters to be addressed in Chapter 7 is that feasibility studies on several of the key issues confronting Cooktown and the Palmer in the late 1870s would almost certainly have resulted in a different course of action to that pursued at the time.

154 It is not being suggested, of course, that the political influence of vested interests was a phenomenon confined to the 1870s or 1880s.

155 See the editorial discussion in *The Cooktown Courier,* 4 April 1877, p. 2.

156 See the report of a public meeting held in Cooktown over the issue in *The Cooktown Courier,* 7 April 1877, p. 3.

its plan, but not before it had caused considerable anguish in Cooktown and reinforced the community's sense of injustice, with *The Cooktown Courier* echoing the sentiment

> ... what have we done to merit this treatment
> at the hands of the government?[157]

A year earlier, the Government had displayed a similar bias — at least in the mind of the Cooktown community — towards the initial development of the settlement itself at Cairns (or Trinity Bay as it was first called). The view of business and civic leaders in Cooktown, as espoused by *The Cooktown Courier,* was that 'before any other port is opened [in the North] ... consideration should be extended to those already formed'.[158] What irked Cooktown even more was the perception that Cairns was receiving far more funding than Cooktown had in its early days and, indeed, that

> ... the government have thought fit ... to foster
> [Cairns] in a most unprecedented manner,
> just as if the annihilation of Cooktown was
> their chief object.[159]

Despite the litany of Cooktown's perceived injustices, it is not being suggested that the town was above reproach in its dealings with the authorities in Brisbane. Much of the mismanagement and ineptitude which so often characterised the conduct of municipal affairs in Cooktown in the late 1870s carried through to the town's dealings with Brisbane. In late 1876, for example, the municipal council forwarded a submission to Brisbane requesting that a water catchment reserve be proclaimed in the foot-hills of Mount Cook. The submission was duly returned in February 1877 on the basis that it not only failed to specify the boundaries of the reserve but did not establish any connection, real or potential, between the reserve and the water supply of the town.[160]

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157 *The Cooktown Courier,* 4 April 1877, p. 2.

158 *The Cooktown Courier,* 16 August 1876, p. 3.

159 *The Cooktown Courier,* 16 August 1876, p. 3.

160 In reporting the exchange of correspondence, *The Cooktown Courier,* 10 February 1877, p. 2 attributed the problem to 'the incompetence of the Municipal Corporation'.

A number of the requests for funding forwarded to the authorities in Brisbane in the late 1870s similarly did little to enhance the credibility of the town's administration. Probably the most glaring example was a request in September 1876 for £1500 for the formation of a road from the town centre to Finch's Bay, a popular swimming spot on the ocean side of the town.[161] After the local member had argued the case in parliament on the basis that 'some means should be provided by which the people could renovate their health by frequent visits ... to the best bathing place of the district', an exasperated colleague asked 'if there was to be any end to the demands of the honourable member?'[162]

As it turned out, the road to Finch's Bay paled into insignificance alongside the £105,000 or so eventually spent by the Government on the ill-fated railway line from Cooktown to Laura in the early 1880s. The saga of that largely-wasted expenditure is also in effect the saga of the demise of Cooktown, an issue addressed further in Chapter 7. What seems relevant to this discussion is how successful or otherwise Cooktown had been in obtaining its fair share of government resources up to that point. Indeed, was there an element of guilt — of making amends for past injustices — in the Government's eventual decision to fund the Cooktown railway?

Certainly, almost every public meeting in Cooktown from about 1875 onwards, regardless of the issue, and almost every editorial in the local newspapers on the subject of government expenditure, articulated in varying degrees of detail (and accuracy) the perceived 'balance sheet' of revenue generated by the town versus government expenditure. At a public meeting in Cooktown in late 1876, for example, one well-respected resident of the town contended that

> [t]he revenue from this port during the last two years had been £200,000 and the expenditure had not been more than £25,000.[163]

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161 *The Cooktown Herald* noted that the request was being made simply 'for the convenience of bathers': *CHPRA,* 23 September 1876, p. 2.

162 See *QPD,* 20, 1876, pp. 1397 and 1400.

163 As reported in *The Cooktown Courier,* 11 October 1876, p. 3. Table 6.6, to follow, suggests that the balance sheet as at 30 June 1876 was more likely revenue of £125,000 against expenditure of £50,000.

The perception within the Cooktown community that the balance sheet was firmly tilted in the Government's favour was a source of considerable agitation. Public meetings were called specifically 'to express the disgust of the people at the paltry amounts doled out by the government for the Cooktown and Palmer districts'.[164] A not uncommon theme at such meetings was the view expressed by *The Cooktown Courier* that

> ... the district has hitherto proved a milch cow of wonderful fecundity, [which has] required no nourishment from the south to sustain it.[165]

The problem, though, with many of the 'balance sheets' used at public meetings or in editorials was that they usually excluded the salaries of government officials and many of the less obvious administrative costs associated with day-to-day government business. Critics of the Government therefore, typically cited a balance sheet for Cooktown and the Palmer River based on an annual revenue contribution of around £60,000 but, in their calculations under expenditure, considered only those funds allocated to public works.[166] The 'official' balance sheet, however, as tabled in parliament for the period to 30 June 1875 shows revenue of £60,067 against expenditure of £58,027 (see Table 6.2 over).

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164 See *CHPRA,* 30 June 1877, p. 2.

165 *The Cooktown Courier,* 17 May 1879, p. 2.

166 See, for example, the editorial in *The Cooktown Courier,* 30 October 1875, p. 2 noting that 'hitherto we have had some little difficulty in ... obtaining such a share of expenditure, warranted by the very large revenue generated by the district'.

Table 6.2 - The Official Statement of Revenue and Expenditure for Cooktown and the Palmer River goldfields to 30 June 1875
(from first settlement/opening to June 1875)

Revenue		Expenditure	
customs	44,551	exploration	3,054
licences	3,884	police	18,049
gold receipts	4,740	stores	2,994
revenue	5,653	customs & harbours	2,769
wharves	835	wharves	3,769
court of petty sessions	404	survey	1,024
		buildings	5,054
Total	**£60,067**	roads & bridges	8,280
		goldfields	5,583
		postal	3,446
		telegraph	4,005
		Total	**£58,027**

Note: A footnote to the original table advised that the statement did not include 'departmental expenses, administration of justice, conveyance of mails nor interest on public debt'.

Source: *QVP*, 2, 1875, p. 917.

Several of the expenditure figures in Table 6.2 seem abnormally high. The figure for exploration, for example, must have included the expedition costs of William Hann and his party in 1872 (and perhaps Dalrymple's expedition, as well as that of Bartley Fahey's from Normanton to the Mitchell River). Similarly, the police costs of £18,049 and that of 'goldfields' for £5,583 must surely have included every policeman who ever accompanied any expedition north of Cardwell, as well obviously as Howard St George's expedition of October 1873.

In the more usual sense of operating costs, Table 6.3 (over) suggests that government expenditure (less public works and municipal loans) in Cooktown throughout the 1870s and early 1880s was about £8,000 per year (see column r).

Table 6.3 - Government Expenditure on Salaries, Grants and Loans to Cooktown 1873-85

Years	LAND AGENT	JUDICIARY	GAOL	POSTAL	MEDICAL OFFICERS	POLICE	HOSPITAL	ROAD INSPECTOR	SCHOOL OF ARTS	CUSTOMS	HARBOURS	SHIPPING OFFICE	RELIEF OFFICE BOARD	MUNICIPAL ENDOWMENT	BOTANICAL GARDENS	LIGHTHOUSES	TEACHERS	SUB-TOTAL	MUNICIPAL LOANS	TOTAL (£)	CUMULATIVE TOTAL (£)
*1	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)	(g)	(h)	(i)	(j)	(k)	(l)	(m)	(n)	(o)	(p)	(q)	(r)	(s)	(t)	(u)
74/75	75	598	-	351	36	600	498	-	-	1071	898	-	-	-	-	-	-	4127	-	4127	4127
75/76	100	750	-	509	100	700	1805	-	-	1221	749	-	-	-	-	-	426	6360	-	6360	10487
76/77	100	750	-	584	142	460	800	-	-	1573	750	-	-	1359	-	-	455	6973	2375	9348	19835
77/78	100	750	-	750	150	420	1535	-	186	1791	748	-	-	1671	-	-	600	8701	2375	11076	30911
78/79	100	750	-	685	150	360	1700	-	82	1853	742	-	-	1962	-	-	746	9130	-125	9005	39916
79/80	100	750	-	700	150	320	445	300	56	1786	752	25	-	1873	-	-	804	8061	4750	12811	52727
80/81	100	850	-	700	150	280	1077	300	35	1766	752	25	-	1565	200	-	796	8596	-125	8471	61198
81/82	-	850	-	700	136	360	733	300	52	1766	740	25	-	948	200	-	717	7527	-116	7411	68609
82/83	-	850	30	700	150	360	754	300	86	1841	746	25	-	748	200	-	456	7246	-245	7001	75610
83/84	-	850	30	700	150	320	807	300	122	1828	832	25	100	970	200	99	477	7810	5565	13375	88985
84/85	-	850	30	700	200	340	1434	300	114	1882	829	23	100	1120	200	108	566	8796	-	8796	97781
TOTAL (£)	**675**	**8598**	**90**	**7079**	**1514**	**4520**	**11588**	**1800**	**733**	**18378**	**8538**	**148**	**200**	**12216**	**1000**	**207**	**6043**	**-**	**14454**	**97781**	**97781**

Notes:
1. Years 1874/75 include period January-June 1874.
2. Salaries for teachers in calendar years.
3. Figures reflect loans and progressive repayments.

Source: Data derived from official expenditure returns in successive issues of QVP, 1875-86.

Obviously, it is not being suggested that the figures in Table 6.3 are exact to the last pound. It also seems probable that the figures do not reflect some expenditure — perhaps £2000 at most — which occurred in late 1873 and may not be included in 1874/75 totals. To widen the scope of the table to include the Palmer River, it would be necessary to add probably another £1500 per year for the salaries and costs of the gold warden and police stationed at the Palmer River goldfields.[167]

In a similar exercise, Table 6.4 (over) shows government expenditure on public works and services in Cooktown, including 'district' roads, across the period 1873 to 1885. In this case, there is no discernible yearly average. To widen its scope to include the Palmer, it would probably be necessary to add another £750 at most to the cumulative total to cover the cost of residential and working accommodation for the gold warden and police stationed at the goldfields, as well as a small amount for the limited public works and services provided by the government at the goldfields.

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167 There are no readily available statistics or records to substantiate the Palmer River costs. But included in the 'costs' would, for example, be the outfitting costs of police uniforms, weapons and horses, and subsequent sustenance (fodder etc) costs.

Table 6.4 - Expenditure on Public Works in Cooktown 1873-86

Years	Customs	Harbours	Postal	Judiciary	Police	Education	Hospital	Rail	Roads	Others	Total (£)	Cumulative Total (£)
	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)	(g)	(h)	(i)	(j)	(k)	(l)
73/74	-	586	303	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	889	889
74/75	3680	550	213	26	27	-	304	-	3390	-	8190	9079
75/76	690	414	-	500	-	1114	184	-	2231	856	5989	15068
76/77	2280	874	2675	359	-	-	-	-	4520	-	10708	25776
77/78	561	-	-	-	620	-	-	-	594	-	1775	27551
78/79	400	-	280	-	707	239	-	-	1736	-	3362	30913
79/80	-	-	-	-	-	-	1945	-	817	-	2762	33675
80/81	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	660	660	34335
81/82	-	3008	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3008	37343
82/83	-	313	-	-	-	-	-	3287	-	1442	5042	42385
83/84	-	4046	-	-	200	-	80	50229	732	1250	56537	98922
84/85	-	4007	-	-	678	216	-	53270	-	-	58171	157093
85/86	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	23293	-	23293	180386
TOTAL (£)	7611	13798	3471	885	2232	1569	2513	106786	37313	4208	180386	-

Notes: Figures in column (i) include expenditure on 'district' roads between Cooktown and its hinterland, to the value of £31,498.

Source: Data derived from a range of official reports and statistics in successive issues of *QVP*, 1874-86 including, for example, Works Department, Engineer for Roads, Auditor-General, Post-Master General, Customs Department and Police Commissioner.

Finally, Table 6.5 shows an estimate of the revenue generated by Cooktown and the Palmer River across the period 1873 to 1884. It is an estimate only in the sense that the revenue from gold escort fees has been calculated on the basis of half of all gold produced at the Palmer River goldfields being conveyed by police escort to Cooktown, and that no account has been taken of the proceeds from the lease of the wharves in Cooktown or various other miscellaneous licence fees.[168] If anything, therefore, the figures at Table 6.5 are likely to understate slightly the total revenue generated.

Table 6.5 - Government Revenue from Cooktown and the Palmer River goldfields 1873-85

	Customs revenue *1 (£'000)	Licences revenue *2 (£'000)	Escort fees *3 (£'000)	Total revenue (£'000)	Cumulative revenue (£'000)
1873/74	18.4	2.0	2.2	22.6	22.6
1874/75	23.2	3.2	5.6	32.0	54.6
1875/76	54.7	7.4	9.4	71.5	126.1
1876/77	70.3	6.6	7.5	84.4	210.5
1877/78	70.7	4.9	6.7	82.3	292.8
1878/79	50.2	4.2	4.5	58.9	351.7
1879/80	51.1	3.6	3.4	58.1	409.8
1880/81	44.9	2.6	2.5	50.0	459.8
1881/82	40.6	1.6	1.9	44.1	503.9
1882/83	37.0	0.9	1.4	39.3	543.2
1883/84	32.4	0.2	0.9	33.5	576.7
1884/85	27.3	0.1	0.4	27.8	604.5
Totals	**520.8**	**37.3**	**46.4**	**604.5**	**604.5**

Notes:
1. Includes only revenue collected at Cooktown.
2. Includes revenue from miners and business licences only, for the Palmer River and Cooktown.
3. Calculated on the basis that half of all gold produced was conveyed by police escort at the fee of 1s 6d per ounce.

Source: Data derived from annual statistics in successive issues of *QVP*, 1874-85.

Using the data from Tables 6.3 to 6.5, it then seems possible to construct an indicative balance sheet for Cooktown and the Palmer River across the period 1873 to 1884. Obviously, the expenditure side of the balance sheet, to be a more accurate reflection of the true situation, would

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168 It is not possible from the available official records to differentiate escort fees paid on the Palmer-Cooktown route, against all other escort fees in the district. The figure of 'one half' is an assessment based broadly on anecdotal accounts. No detailed statistics are readily available for wharf lease receipts or other miscellaneous fees.

need to show not only the cost of salaries and expenditure on public works in Cooktown and the Palmer, but the amortised costs incurred by the authorities in Brisbane (and possibly elsewhere in Queensland) in providing the range of government services to the district. Examples would include postal and telegraph services, land administration, and the headquarters cost component of the police, customs and education departments, as well as the judiciary.

Putting aside those 'external' costs, which it is accepted could be not insignificant, the indicative balance sheet at Table 6.6 (below) suggests that the government was profiting from Cooktown and the Palmer River goldfields to the value of around £40,000 per annum between 1875 and 1880. Moreover, by 1883, Cooktown and the Palmer River goldfields had 'profited' the government probably in excess of £400,000. Indeed, it was only the expenditure by the government of over £100,000 in the years 1883 to 1885 on the Cooktown-Laura railway line that reduced the sum to around £328,000 by mid 1885.[169]

Table 6.6 - An Indicative Balance Sheet for Cooktown and the Palmer River Goldfields 1873-85
(showing government revenue against expenditure)

	Revenue *1 (£'000)	Expenditure *2 (£'000)	Cumulaitve Balance *3 (£'000)
1873/74	22.6	4.4	+18.2
1874/75	32.0	13.9	+36.3
1875/76	71.5	13.9	+93.9
1876/77	84.4	21.6	+156.7
1877/78	82.3	14.4	+224.6
1878/79	58.9	13.9	+269.6
1879/80	58.1	17.1	+310.6
1880/81	50.0	10.7	+349.6
1881/82	44.1	12.0	+381.0
1882/83	39.3	13.6	+406.7
1883/84	33.5	71.5	+368.7
1884/85	27.8	68.5	+328.0

Notes:
1. Data derived from Table 6.5.
2. Data derived from Tables 6.3 and 6.4 with £1500 per year added for Palmer River salaries and £60 per year for public works expenditure at the Palmer River. An amount of £2000 also added to 1873/74

169 Superficially, the large sum expended by the government on the Cooktown-Laura railway line seems to have been motivated at least partly by a recognition that the district had been dealt with somewhat shabbily over the previous decade. That issue is, however, addressed in more detail in Chapter 7.

figures to cover possible unaccounted expenditure from Table 6.3. Note that Table 6.4 included expenditure for FY85/86 which has not been included here.

3. Positive values show excess of revenue over expenditure.

Obviously, however, the simplistic revenue figures of even £40,000 per year and £400,000 across the decade need to be kept in perspective. Indeed, in the wider context of revenue collection across the colony, the figures pale somewhat. In the financial year 1875/76, for example, total revenue receipts for Queensland were £1,263,269, of which customs revenue comprised £494,710.[170] In general terms, therefore, the revenue generated annually by Cooktown and the Palmer River constituted less than 5 per cent of the Queensland total.[171]

The View of the Community

For the residents of Cooktown, the issue was not the size of their contribution to the Queensland total, but their perception — given the important catalytic effect the Palmer goldfields had had on the Queensland economy — that Brisbane had not given them 'a fair deal'. Moreover, they were disappointed that successive governments had generally failed even to acknowledge that the district had made a positive contribution to the colony's finances.

Throughout the 1870s, therefore, Cooktown toyed with the notion of separation from the south, primarily in the context of a better financial deal for the district. Cooktown was never, though, the driving force behind the North Queensland separation movement.[172] Indeed, its support seemed driven more by its concern for where 'the capital of the north' would be, together with some sympathy for the argument that the government of a colony 'as large as the United Kingdom and France put together' could not hope to exercise its power across such an expanse of country.[173]

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170 See *QVP,* 2, 1877, p. 22.

171 Even in 1876, for example, at the peak of the Palmer, total revenue was around £80,000, against the Queensland total of £1.2 million, a proportion of 6.6 per cent.

172 In the mid to late 1870s, most of the agitation for separation came from Bowen: see, for example, the editorial in *The Cooktown Courier,* 24 June 1876, p. 3 discussing the circular received from the Separation League of North Queensland in Bowen.

173 See, for example, the advocacy of Cooktown as the potential capital in *CHPRA,* 17 October 1874, p. 2 and the 'tyranny of distance' discussion in *CHPRA* 16 January 1875, p. 2.

Certainly, given the choice, it seems probable that Cooktown's preference would have been for financial rather than territorial separation. Indeed, after the failure of the proposed *Financial Separation Bill of 1877,* which promised 'an equitable adjustment of the receipts and expenditure of the colony',[174] Cooktown's support for any broader form of separation waned noticeably. Despite further occasional calls for separation from various interests within Cooktown, usually in response to some perceived government injustice, the consensus seems to have been that Cooktown would fare even worse under a capital in Townsville or Bowen.[175] As the economic importance of Cooktown and the Palmer waned in the late 1870s and early 1880s, particularly in relative terms to Townsville, the consensus against separation strengthened even further.

What emerged in its place, as will be discussed in Chapter 7, was a conviction that Cooktown and the Palmer River goldfields had a viable and enduring future as part of Queensland, provided that investment capital could be attracted to the area and that durable lines of communications were put in place between Cooktown and its hinterland. The fact that a large sum of money would be needed to fund the necessary infrastructure was, so the argument went, the inevitable consequence of government neglect in the past. Indeed, by the late 1870s, the prevailing view of the stalwarts in Cooktown was that

> ... had the government only fostered this district in the manner they should have done ... our gold-fields would be developed, and would be employing thousands of men today ... and our revenue would have maintained its standard for all futurity.[176]

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174 Cooktown's support even for financial separation was qualified by the demand that the expenditure of revenue would need to be devolved to local bodies: see the discussion in *The Cooktown Courier,* 8 August 1877, p. 3.

175 *The Cooktown Courier* had consistently argued against separation on the basis that if the new capital was in either Townsville or Bowen, even fewer resources would be made available to Cooktown: see, for example, *The Cooktown Courier,* 22 November 1876, p. 3.

176 See the speech by Alderman Hodel at a public meeting in Cooktown in February 1879 as reported in *The Cooktown Courier,* 22 February 1879, p. 2, as well as the similar speech by J. Macrossan MLA at a civic banquet in Cooktown in November 1877 as reported in *The Cooktown Courier,* 21 November 1877, p. 3.

CHAPTER 7 - BOOM TO BUST

The extremely optimistic views of Cooktown's potential, as espoused by its business and civic leaders in the mid to late 1870s, were arguably unexceptional in the sense that it would have been surprising for any newly-established community in Queensland or Australia at that time not to have professed some sense of destiny for its town. Moreover, most casual observers would probably have expected a certain degree of exaggeration, or at least a sanguine viewpoint, in any local pronouncements as to the longer-term viability of such a town.

In Cooktown's case, however, the hyperbole in relation to the town's progress and its prospects seemed at times to stem from perceptions of importance somewhat removed from reality. *The Cooktown Herald* in September 1876, for example, sweepingly asserted that the town 'has, in the space of three years, made more progress ... than any other new port in the world'.[1] *The Cooktown Courier* in December 1879 similarly seemed to be stretching its credibility, even allowing for the journalistic style of the day, when it contended that

> ... the wonderful stride that has been made during the past six years by a place previously quite unknown ... is probably without parallel in the history of civilization.[2]

The other noticeable feature of the rhetoric coming from business and civic leaders in Cooktown in the late 1870s was that the focus of their optimism changed almost on a yearly basis. After it became apparent, for example, that the alluvial workings at the Palmer were in decline, business leaders in Cooktown began extolling the untapped wealth of deep-reef mining, as well as the coal and tin resources of the district. When it then became obvious that the further exploitation of those resources was being stymied by the lack of machinery, the focus of the business community switched to the need for investment capital. When the injection of limited capital failed to provide the panacea, their attention settled finally on the

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1 *The Cooktown Herald and Palmer River Advertiser (CHPRA),* 2 September 1876, p. 2.

2 *The Cooktown Courier,* 24 December 1879, p. 2.

requirement for a railway line from Cooktown to the Palmer. Overlaying the shifting focus of business and civic leaders across the late 1870s and early 1880s were the starkly-divided views of the European community on the role of Chinese immigrants in the development of Far North Queensland.

Against that background of often exaggerated rhetoric and seemingly-confused strategic priorities for the development of the region, it could be argued that successive governments in Brisbane were prudent in not committing large sums to Cooktown and the Palmer in the late 1870s. Conversely, it perhaps could be argued that the authorities in Brisbane should have taken a more interventionist role in the development of the region, rather than leaving it in the hands of patently inept locals. In the event, the only major initiative of the Government was the funding of the railway line from Cooktown to Laura — an initiative which, with the admitted benefit of hindsight, was doomed even before it began.

What is less clear is why the Government eventually agreed in 1882 to allocate over £100,000 to that ill-fated venture, having resisted local pressure to do so for at least the previous five years. Did the Government really believe that the Cooktown railway would be a paying concern? If it did, why had the Government waited until the district was effectively on its knees before it provided the funding? Or was it simply that the authorities in Brisbane finally caved in to the unrelenting hyperbole emanating from the business community in Cooktown?

It will be argued in this chapter that approval for the railway line from Cooktown to Laura was primarily the result of bureaucratic inertia. Yet even the most basic feasibility study would surely have revealed that the project was ill-conceived and unlikely to succeed. Cooktown, though, was a long way from Brisbane, and the authorities there no doubt had more pressing issues nearer to their doorstep. Moreover, it was probably easier to let the funding proceed, than face yet another round of harping from Cooktown that it had been poorly treated over the years by Brisbane, and deserved some recompense for the contribution it had made to Queensland's coffers since 1873.

An alternative scenario, as has been mentioned in previous chapters, is that had the town's leadership been less obsessed with the commercial nexus between Cooktown and the Palmer, the £100,000 or so spent on the railway could probably have been available in earlier years for the establishment of an industry or service — such as fish processing or a timber mill — which offered Cooktown and the region some better prospect of surviving in the longer term. As will be discussed shortly, though, business and civic leaders in Cooktown seemed particularly blinkered in their consideration of ways to diversify the local economy.

Indeed, what emerges in this chapter is that influential figures in Cooktown — primarily service providers — were less interested in the civic advancement or long-term viability of the town than they were in ensuring a continuous flow of visitors and supplies *through* the town. Their approach to diversification, therefore, centred largely on talking up the prospects of the region, with the aim of attracting a continuing throughput of new arrivals, be they intending residents, would-be miners or agricultural labourers, and with little regard for whether they were Europeans, Chinese or South Asians. Needless to say, an economy based on a collection of stores had little prospect of surviving in the long-term.

The Initial Discoveries

During the first two years of Cooktown's existence, the local newspapers rightly reported the alluvial gold deposits at the Palmer in glowing terms. *The Cooktown Herald* in August 1874 noted that 'one and all say ... [the Palmer] is the richest and largest gold field ever opened in Queensland'.[3] Cooktown itself was similarly described in effusive terms, with *The Cooktown Herald* contending in January 1875 that

> ... no other town in any of the Australian colonies
> can bear any comparison with Cooktown in the
> rapid progress it has made since its first settlement.[4]

Throughout those same years, the local newspapers were quick to attribute any slackening in alluvial yields at the Palmer to temporary

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3 *CHPRA*, 5 August 1874, p. 4.
4 *CHPRA*, 3 January 1875, p. 2.

difficulties imposed by the wet season.[5] Moreover, any reports in southern papers which suggested that the future of the Palmer was questionable, or that miners were deserting the fields, were forcefully rebutted. When *The Brisbane Courier* reported in early July 1874 that a number of disgruntled miners had returned south from the Palmer, *The Cooktown Courier* — in an effort to counter any adverse publicity reaching overseas readers — reported that

> ... we shudder to think what an opinion Europe will form of us .... [So] we have sent copies of our *Courier* to all the crowned and uncrowned heads of Europe, and two extra to the Bank of England.[6]

By mid 1875, however, the local newspapers were somewhat cautiously floating the idea that the alluvial deposits at the Palmer were probably not inexhaustible and that the long-term future of the goldfields more likely lay in its reefs.[7] In August 1875, the manager of the newly-formed Palmer Quartz Crushing Company was publicly predicting that

> ... the alluvial will be exhausted in ... about four years but [with its] reefs ... North Queensland is destined to become a great rich reefing country.[8]

With typical extravagance, and based on little more than the superficial assessment of miners with experience on the Victorian goldfields, the local newspapers were soon 'talking up' the prospects of reef-mining at the Palmer.[9] By December 1875, *The Cooktown Herald* was predicting that 'the Palmer reefs will prove of wonderful value [and] bespeak a glorious future for the North'.[10] In March 1876, *The Cooktown Courier* declared, without any real foundation, that

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5 See, for example, the report in *CHPRA,* 22 April 1874, p. 3 noting that 'owing to the continual wet weather ... the [Palmer] river is still unworkable'.

6 *The Cooktown Courier,* 18 July 1874, p. 3.

7 In October 1874, *The Rockhampton Bulletin* had somewhat uncharitably suggested that 'the workings are shallow and must soon be exhausted ... [while] there is as yet no report of deep ground being discovered: see *CHPRA,* 31 October 1874, p. 2.

8 As reported in *CHPRA,* 7 August 1875, p. 2.

9 Although some selected pieces of quartz were 'dolly-crushed' in the interim, the first machine-crushing of quartz at the Palmer did not take place until early 1877: see *CHPRA,* 13 January 1877, p. 2.

10 *CHPRA,* 6 November 1875, p. 2.

> ... we have no hesitation whatever ... in stating that ... this portion of North Queensland possesses the largest and generally richest quartz region yet discovered in any part of Australia, if not the world.[11]

The Official Reports from the Goldfields

Clearly, the local newspapers and the business community in Cooktown realised they were on reasonably safe ground when their pronouncement and predictions were broadly supported by the official statistics showing annual gold production at the Palmer increasing from 58,829 ounces in 1873 to 250,400 ounces in 1875.[12] Thereafter, however, as gold production at the Palmer declined over the following five years at the rate of about 30,000 ounces per year, the local newspapers obviously found it difficult to continue being effusive in the face of raw data to the contrary, although that did not stop the ever-ebullient *Cooktown Courier* from asserting in late 1878 that

> ... we have every hope and good reason for anticipating that next year's report ... will prove a much more satisfactory one, judging from recent discoveries.[13]

From 1877 onwards, though, the annual reports of successive wardens at the Palmer River goldfields presented statistical evidence, backed by professional judgment, that the Palmer was in steady decline. The 1877 report, for example, stated that in relation to the alluvial deposits, 'many of the Chinese find it difficult to eke out a scanty living', while quartz mining 'despite the high average of stone crushed ... has not been deemed sufficiently remunerative to ... allure many men to engage in reefing'.[14]

Two years later, Warden Sellheim opened his report with the comment that 'I regret to inform you that ... the hopes that were entertained at the beginning of the year have not been realised'.[15] He then went on to

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11 *The Cooktown Courier,* 18 March 1876, p. 2.

12 Data derived from Table 6.1 in Chapter 6 (see page 278).

13 *The Cooktown Courier,* 10 August 1878, p. 2 in response to the report from the Palmer that gold production was down 16,000 ounces over the same period in 1877.

14 See the report in Annual Report of the Department of Mines for Queensland 1877 in *Votes and proceedings of the Legislative Assembly of Queensland [QVP],* 2, 1878, pp. 311-2.

15 See his report in *QVP,* 2, 1880, pp. 599-600.

report that 'reefing has been in anything but a flourishing condition'.[16] Three years later again, in 1882, Warden Hodgkinson similarly attributed the ongoing decline in production to 'the natural result of an exhaustion of the repeatedly worked alluvial [deposits]'.[17] In 1883, the Undersecretary for Mines in his overview of the annual report noted that

> [t]he warden's report [for the Palmer] is rather depressing and shows a continued falling off of production, population and revenue, in consequence of the exhaustion of the alluvial fields and also want of capital to develop the reefs.[18]

Certain influential voices in Cooktown — most notably the business clique of James Baird, Frederick Beardmore, Francis Hodel, Edmund Power, William Hartley, and the brothers Callaghan and John Walsh — chose to ignore the official reports coming from the Palmer, or at least adopted a much more sanguine view of the prospects for the region. The local member, John Walsh, blithely told Parliament in June 1879 that the district 'had passed through the worst ordeal' and predicted that Cook would yet be 'the most important district in the colony'.[19] Extraordinarily, he also told Parliament a month later that

> ... he could now produce figures to show ... beyond doubt ... that the Palmer and Hodgkinson goldfields were merely in their infancy.[20]

The local newspapers were also initially loath to acknowledge any permanent decline in yields from the Palmer or that the decline was impacting on commerce in Cooktown. Their usual explanation was that any falling off in trade was simply attributable to 'the expected slackness incidental to the wet season'.[21] When the downturn continued across the following dry season as well, *The Cooktown Courier* bravely suggested that the slackening in trade 'we regard as nothing more serious than the recurring ebb of the incoming tide'.[22]

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16 *QVP,* 2, 1880, pp. 599-600.

17 See his report in *QVP,* 1883/84, p. 1551.

18 See his report in *QVP,* 3, 1884, p. 172.

19 Quoted in *The Cooktown Courier,* 25 June 1879, p. 2. See also *Queensland Parliamentary Debates (QPD),* 29, 1879, p. 375.

20 As quoted in *The Cooktown Courier,* 19 July 1879, p. 2.

21 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 8 January 1876, p. 2.

22 *The Cooktown Courier,* 3 January 1877, p. 3.

By early 1878, however, after two years of steady decline 'both in the mercantile and mining interests of this district',[23] the Cooktown community seemed generally ready to acknowledge that simply talking up the prospects of the region was unlikely to remedy the situation. The dilemma was that few could agree even on the cause of the decline. A year later, *The Cooktown Courier* was still trying to galvanise the community into addressing the question, with its editorial of mid April 1879 noting that

> ... the continual falling off ... in our population and the great depression now existing ... in commercial circles leads us naturally to the consideration of what has caused the same.[24]

As will be discussed later in this chapter, the downturn in the region's viability came to be attributed across the late 1870s and early 1880s to a number of causes. Undoubtedly, the most contentious in the mid 1870s was that of Chinese immigration and the role that the Chinese had and should play in the development of Far North Queensland.

The Chinese Question

For the first fifteen years or so of Queensland's existence, the presence in the colony of a small number of Chinese was simply not an issue. Most of the 3305 Chinese enumerated at the 1871 census, for example, were small storekeepers, market-gardeners or hawkers, generally notable for their industry, frugality and law-abiding behaviour.[25] Many of them had probably come *via* the gold-rushes in Victoria or New South Wales or, more likely, were the kin of those that had.[26] Moreover, the number of Chinese in Queensland had increased by only one or two hundred each year

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23 At a public meeting called in late March 1878, Howard St George noted that '[a] great depression exists at present': see *The Cooktown Courier,* 23 March 1878, p. 3.

24 *The Cooktown Courier,* 19 April 1879, p. 3.

25 In 1871, there were a total of 28,351 Chinese in the Australian colonies, of whom only 44 were females: see Table 2.1 in C.Y. Choi, *Chinese migration and settlement in Australia,* Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1975, p. 22.

26 See the discussion of kin-oriented migration in Choi, *Chinese migration,* pp. 13-4. But note also Choi's contention that unaccompanied or single males typically only stayed for short periods, usually one or two years, albeit that it was not uncommon for them then to remigrate one or more times.

over the previous decade, notwithstanding the discovery of gold at Gympie in 1867.[27]

Accordingly, when Queensland introduced its first gold-mining legislation, *The Gold Fields Act of 1874,* it contained no provisions intended to restrict Chinese immigration to the colony, such as capitation taxes or discriminatory licence fees.[28] In part, that was probably in recognition also of the failure of Victoria's restrictive legislation of 1855, which was circumvented by the landing at Guichen Bay in South Australia of almost 15,000 Chinese immigrants in 1857, who avoided the capitation fee of £10 by proceeding overland to the Victorian goldfields.[29] The Queensland authorities also were perhaps influenced by the fact that the repeal of restrictive legislation in Victoria and New South Wales in 1865 and 1867 respectively had resulted in no appreciable change in Chinese immigration to those colonies.[30]

It is also evident that the Queensland Government's lack of concern was shared, initially at least, by the Cooktown community. *The Cooktown Herald,* reporting the arrival of 100 or so Chinese in mid July 1874 *via* the SS *Boomerang,* noted that 'we are pleased to see [these] new arrivals'.[31] Almost a year later, the same newspaper was still speaking favourably of the Chinese, contending that 'their presence ... has added much to the dignity and importance of the port in its commercial relations with Singapore and Hong Kong'.[32] *The Cooktown Herald* was also adamant

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27 In 1868, for example, the number of Chinese miners at the Gympie goldfields was only around 600: see H. Holthouse, *Gympie Gold,* Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1973, p. 106.

28 From 1859 until 1874, goldmining in Queensland was administered under legislation inherited from New South Wales: see the discussion by N. Kirkman, 'The Palmer River Goldfield' in K.H. Kennedy (ed.), *Readings in North Queensland mining history,* Vol. 1, James Cook University of North Queensland, Townsville, 1980, p. 120.

29 See, for example, the account in J. Lyng, *Non-Britishers in Australia: influence on population and progress,* Macmillan, Melbourne, 1927, p. 159. It would of course, have been much more difficult to reach the Palmer River goldfields *via* an adjoining colony.

30 See, for example, the discussion in Choi, *Chinese migration*, p. 23 noting that the Chinese population in both colonies continued to decline after the repeal of legislation. It could be argued, of course, that the two colonies had felt it safe to repeal their legislation *because* of the downwards trend.

31 *CHPRA,* 15 July 1874, p. 2.

32 See *CHPRA,* 28 April 1875, p. 2.

that the presence of Chinese at the Palmer would not be to the detriment of Europeans, noting in August 1875 that

> ... there [does not] seem to be the slightest reason to fear that ... Chinese immigration will have the effect of denying a single white man from the Palmer.[33]

The views espoused by *The Cooktown Herald* were, of course, largely those of the European business community in Cooktown, which benefited from the throughput of arriving Chinese, and their subsequent resupply. In October 1877, *The Cooktown Courier* — which by then had become virulently anti-Chinese — noted scathingly that 'we are all living on the Chinese, both storekeepers and working people [alike]'.[34] More accurately, though, the Europeans who benefited were not the small storekeepers and merchants, but those who facilitated the trade of Chinese merchants in the town, such as customs and import agents — the likes of Frederick Beardmore, James Baird and William Hartley — certain artisans, and those European carriers and packers engaged in the Palmer trade.[35]

The wider community did benefit, however, from the willingness of Chinese to engage in the mundane occupations of 'hewers of wood and drawers of water', as well as providing the town with a ready supply of fish, poultry and fresh vegetables.[36] The visiting correspondent to the popular *Vagabond* journal, sent to Cooktown in late 1877 to investigate 'the Chinese question', reported to his readers that

> ... [the situation in Cooktown] has been totally misrepresented in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne. The Chinese ... [as menial labourers] are indispensable in the district.[37]

Certainly, the apparent adaptability of Chinese labourers to the climate and conditions of North Queensland, against the perceived

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33 *CHPRA,* 18 August 1875, p. 2.

34 *The Cooktown Courier,* 27 October 1877, p. 3.

35 See, for example, the criticism in *The Cooktown Courier,* 3 November 1877, p. 3 asserting that Chinese immigration resulted in 'a short-lived ... prosperity that benefited only a section of the community'.

36 See the editorial in *The Cooktown Courier,* 21 October 1876, p. 2 lamenting that those tasks had fallen to the Chinese because the European population was 'too busy [with their business affairs] to do these things themselves'.

37 As quoted in *The Cooktown Courier,* 31 October 1877, p. 3.

unsuitability of Europeans for work in the tropics, was an underlying tenet of the pro-Chinese argument. As early as 1874, *The Cooktown Herald* was asserting that 'we are no advocate for Chinese immigration ... but we would willingly see coolie labor [sic] introduced ... to cultivate this land'.[38]

The pro-Chinese lobby — Beardmore, Baird, Power, Hodel, Hartley, the Walshes and W.H.L. Bailey of *The Cooktown Herald* — was very conscious, though, of the concerns that Chinese labourers would undermine the pay and working conditions of Europeans. *The Cooktown Herald,* therefore, periodically attempted to assuage such concerns by pointing out that 'were the Chinese ousting Europeans from employment or in competition with them for wages ... there might be some slight cause for complaint'.[39] After the ASN Company began employing Chinese labourers on their steamers in 1878, *The Cooktown Courier* suggested that a line should be drawn across Queensland, 'prohibiting the Celestials from leaving the North' while creating in North Queensland a class of lower-paid Asiatic labourers.[40]

By the time that suggestion was made, however, a line could well have been drawn down the main street of Cooktown, so deeply was the European community divided over the Chinese question. Apart from William Morgan, one of the town's solicitors and editor of *The Cooktown Courier,* those opposed to the Chinese were a loose-knit group, with few leading personalities. Some, such as Samuel Samper, Michael Wholohan, Adolphus Norrie and Joseph Josephson, were small-scale merchants or publicans, whose trade had suffered with the decline in European miners passing though the town.[41] Others were ex-miners, who supposedly had been forced from the Palmer by the Chinese influx. Indeed, those speaking out against the Chinese at public meetings were often individuals who previously had professed no public identification with the anti-Chinese

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38 *CHPRA,* 7 October 1874, p. 2. The same editorial argued that Chinese labourers were much preferred to South Sea Islanders, who 'are of very little use, idle, lazy and revengeful'.

39 See *CHPRA,* 1 December 1875, p. 2. As has been mentioned previously, Chinese labourers were employed by the Cooktown council on roadworks within the town: see *The Cooktown Courier,* 28 April 1877, p. 3. But that situation arose only because of the scarcity of European labourers: see *The Cooktown Courier,* 21 April 1877, p. 3.

40 *The Cooktown Courier,* 24 September 1879, p. 2.

41 See also the discussion and identification of those in the anti-Chinese lobby in Kirkman, 'The Palmer River goldfield', p. 128.

lobby, but were moved by the occasion (or the alcohol consumed beforehand) to offer their viewpoint.

That is not to suggest that the anti-Chinese lobby was disorganised or lacking in ideological zeal. Nevertheless, public meetings in the late 1870s, called to address the issue, often degenerated into uproar, with nominated speakers not infrequently being forced to resume their seats because of the heckling and jeering directed at them.[42] Some meetings ended in violence and at one, in November 1877, demonstrators burned and stoned an effigy of W.H.L. Bailey, the proprietor of *The Cooktown Herald.*[43]

For those opposed to Chinese immigration, there were basically three issues. The first was their belief that the Chinese were plundering the resources of Queensland. *The Cooktown Courier,* in March 1876 typically asserted that 'their departure is signalised by so much material wealth departed, never to return'.[44] On that issue, as was addressed in Chapter 6, the criticism of the Chinese in Far North Queensland was well-founded. The point needs to be made, however, that there was no legislation in Queensland at that time which either prohibited or inhibited the export of gold to China or anywhere else.

The second accusation was that the Chinse enjoyed the same privileges as any European resident of Queensland, but failed to contribute either an equitable share of the burden or towards the development of the colony generally. *The Cooktown Courier,* in August 1875, asserted that 'if these men are to come here as equals ... why should they not bear their equal share of the State burden?'[45] A similar editorial in November 1877 complained that 'not an ounce of gold obtained by the Chinese has been invested in the colony in any shape or form'.[46]

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42 See the report of a meeting in *The Cooktown Courier,* 24 October 1877, p. 3 with the editorial asserting that 'the deplorable proceedings on Monday ... will remain a blot in the annals of Cooktown'.

43 See the report in *The Cooktown Courier,* 10 November 1877, p. 3.

44 *The Cooktown Courier,* 15 March 1876, p. 2. See also *The Cooktown Courier,* 3 November 1877, p. 2 asserting that '[every] ounce of gold obtained by the Chinese ... has all found its way to China'.

45 *The Cooktown Courier,* 4 August 1875, p. 3.

46 *The Cooktown Courier,* 3 November 1877, p. 3.

Certainly, as has been discussed in previous chapters, Chinese financiers and merchants had almost exclusive control over the commercial transactions involved in the movement of Chinese miners to Australia and their subsequent day-to-day sustenance at the Palmer. Moreover, there is little evidence to suggest that any of the proceeds remained in Australia, with the obvious exception of the small proportion expended on the construction or purchase of commercial and residential premises in Cooktown itself.

The accusation that the Chinese failed to pay their fair share of taxes, though, seems largely unfounded. Obviously, popular reports of gold wardens rounding-up dozens of unregistered Chinese miners at a time and 'impounding' them until their licence fees were paid,[47] would have added to the contemporary perception that the majority of Chinese miners were delinquent tax-payers.

Table 7.1 (over), however, shows that a total of nearly 50,000 miners' licences were issued on the Palmer River goldfields between 1874 and 1885, representing an 'issue rate' of 84.6 per cent (that is, licences issued against the estimated number of miners). Moreover, columns (d), (e) and (f) of Table 7.1 suggest that over 44,000 licences were granted to Chinese miners, representing an issue rate across the period of 84.0 per cent. The issue to the Chinese of that number of miners' licences, together with the revenue generated from business licences and escort fees, and local government rates and land taxes on owned or rented properties, as well as customs duties paid on the substantial volume of Chinese imports, would seem to rebut the accusation in question.

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47 See, for example, W.R.O. Hill, *Forty-five years experiences in North Queensland,* Pole, Brisbane, 1907, p. 68.

Table 7.1 - Miners' Licences Issued at the Palmer River Goldfields 1874-1885

Years (a)	Total Licences Issued (b)	Estimated Number of Miners (c)	Licences Issued to Chinese (d)	Estimated Number of Chinese Miners (e)	Issue Rate to Chinese (f)
1874	2976	3520	1158	1500	77.2%
1875	4102	7060	2608	5400	48.3%
1876	10131	9900	9321	9000	103.6%
1877	9187	13250	8962	13000	68.9%
1878	5962	8880	5620	8500	66.1%
1879	5013	5220	4815	5000	96.3%
1880	3960	4140	3789	3950	95.9%
1881	3425	3303	3286	3148	104.4%
1882	2184	1437	2088	1330	157.0%
1883	1456	946	1362	842	161.8%
1884	1007	765	948	699	135.6%
1885	541	582	467	500	93.4%
Total	**49,944**	**59,003**	**44,424**	**52,869**	**84.0%**

Notes:

1. Figures in columns (b), (c) and (e) derived from official statistics as published in successive issues of *QVP*, 1875-86, as at 31 December for each year.

2. Figures in column (d) calculated by deducting the number of licences issued to Europeans from the figures in column (b). The number of European licences derived by applying an assumed 'issue rate' of 90% to the official estimate for the number of Europeans at the goldfields. That is, the assumption is being made — based on loose anecdotal evidence — that around 90% of all European miners at the goldfields had a current miner's licence.

3. Figures in column (f) calculated by dividing column (d) figures by (e). It is interesting to note that across the period 1881 to 1884 (where the 'issue rate' exceeded 100%), the official estimates of the number of Chinese at the Palmer were obviously under-stated.

The third claim of the anti-Chinese lobby was that European miners were being forced from the goldfields (and indeed from Far North Queensland) by the Chinese. *The Cooktown Courier* in October 1876, for example, asserted that 'where the Chinese get a footing, we Europeans go to the wall'.[48] The associated argument was that had the Chinese been

48 *The Cooktown Courier,* 21 October 1876, p. 2.

excluded from the Palmer River, the wealth of the goldfields would have kept thousands of European miners in steady employment for many years.[49]

The basis of their argument was the fact that by 1877 the population of the Palmer River goldfields was comprised almost entirely of Chinese, while the number of European miners had fallen from a high of over 2000 in 1874 to less than 300.[50] The reality was that none of the European miners had been physically forced from the Palmer; rather, they had willingly deserted their claims for rushes elsewhere, such as the newly-discovered Hodgkinson goldfields. It is also questionable whether European miners — unlike the Chinese — would have been prepared anyway to return to their abandoned claims on the Palmer and patiently rework them several times over, for often diminishing returns.[51] Accordingly, the notion that the Palmer's potential of some 1.2 million ounces of gold could have been recovered by a lesser number of Europeans seems largely specious.

Nevertheless, it suited European miners — resentful at the success of the systematic and laborious methods employed by the Chinese — simply to complain that they had been forced out. In a similar way, it sometimes suited the anti-Chinese lobby in Cooktown to portray the Chinese as a wretched, inferior class, threatening the social order of white Australia. That said, the class issue *per se* was not a major factor in the ongoing debate in Cooktown in the late 1870s.[52] One particularly rabid editorial in *The Cooktown Courier* in February 1877, however, questioned

> ... on what principle of equity or fair play are we compelled to admit this ... swarm of the very lowest classes of a race ... which has sunk into

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49 See, for example, *The Cooktown Courier,* 3 November 1877, p. 3.

50 In 1877, according to the Annual Report of the Department of Mines for Queensland, the total European population at the Palmer River was 800, against a Chinese population of 15,000: see *QVP,* 2, 1878, p. 311.

51 For a good account of the mining methods of the Chinese, see N. Kirkman, 'Chinese miners on the Palmer' in *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland,* 13, 2, May 1987, p. 52.

52 Much of the vitriolic hostility twards the Chinese, over perceived threats both to labour standards and social order, seems to have arisen in the early 1880s and *via* the Southern press, rather than in Cooktown. See, for example, the discussion in W.R. Johnston, *The call of the land: a history of Queensland to the present day,* Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1982, p. 73.

> the very putrescence of a rotten civilization?
> [T]heir presence taints the whole community ....[53]

The class issue was also not a major factor, ostensibly at least, in the legislation introduced by the Queensland Parliament in 1876 to take account of the influx of Chinese to the Palmer. The amendments of May 1876 to the *Customs Duties Act,* increasing the duty on rice from £2 to £7/6/8 per ton, were argued as revenue-raising measures, rather than any attempt to restrict Chinese immigration.[54] Moreover, even though Chinese merchants in Cooktown petitioned Parliament to repeal the increased duty, there is little evidence to suggest that the legislation had any direct effect on Chinese immigration.[55]

The second piece of legislation introduced in 1876 was more controversial. The proposed *Gold Fields Act Amendment Act of 1876,* introduced into Parliament on 24 July 1876, increased the miners licence fee for Asian and African aliens from ten shillings to £3, and for business licences from £4 to £10.[56] The discriminatory nature of the proposed legislation provoked considerable outcry, with *The Cooktown Herald* pointing out that '[under] existing treaties ... all men are equal before the law'.[57] Even the usually anti-Chinese *Cooktown Courier* felt obliged to counsel that

> [i]t would be well if the Legislature would pause before they ... commit themselves to a course as repugnant to the British Constitution and British Justice, as it would be to common sense.[58]

In the event, the legislation failed to receive the assent of the Queensland Governor who, acting on instructions from London, reserved

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53 *The Cooktown Courier,* 17 February 1877, p. 2.

54 See *QPD,* 1876, 20, p. 362.

55 The petition was rejected on the basis that it untruthfully (in the view of Parliament) asserted that the Chinese were 'already oppressed': see the discussion in *QPD,* 1876, 20, pp. 514-7. See also the view that by mid 1877 'the increased rice tax was having its effect on the diet and health of the miners': Kirkman, 'Chinese miners on the Palmer', p. 57, although establishing a link between that effect and the rate of immigration is more difficult.

56 In introducing the bill, Minister for Works Thorn claimed it 'was to compel Asiatic aliens to contribute more than they did at the present time to the revenue for the rights they enjoyed': see *QPD,* 1876, 20, p. 371.

57 See *CHPRA,* 5 May 1875, p. 2 for an earlier denunciation of any proposal to increase the fees for Chinese.

58 *The Cooktown Courier,* 6 September 1876, p. 3.

the bill.[59] Undeterred, the Queensland Government resubmitted the legislation in 1877, having made some minor changes on the advice of Premier Parkes of New South Wales.[60] It also submitted a second equally discriminatory bill, *The Chinese Immigrants Regulation Bill of 1877,* which provided for a capitation fee of £10 to be levied on all arriving Chinese immigrants, aimed 'at regulating and repressing the undue immigration of Chinese to the Northern shores of Australia'.[61]

With some obvious reluctance, the Imperial Government sanctioned both bills in October 1877.[62] In conveying the Queen's Assent to the Governor of Queensland, however, the authorities in London stated their view that

> ... the true solution ... is to be found in the recognition of Chinese immigration, under careful regulations ... rather than its discouragement by penal legislation.[63]

In Cooktown, the news that both bills had been approved was met with mixed reactions. The Chinese businessmen in the town petitioned the Emperor of China, albeit without success, seeking to draw his attention to their belief that the legislation constituted a breach of the Treaty of Tientsin, concluded in 1860 between China and England.[64] *The Cooktown Herald,* as could be expected, described the legislation as 'iniquitous, tyrranical and unjust' and predicted 'the most baneful ... [consequences]'.[65]

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59 In a letter to the Governor, Lord Carnarvon suggested that the next session of the Queensland Parliament may like to recommend 'provisions which ... will appear less directly and exclusively aimed at the subjects of a friendly Power': see *QVP,* 1, 1877, p. 815 and the discussion in R.L.. Tomkys, Queensland immigration 1859-1901, MA thesis, University of Queensland, 1930, p. 89.

60 See the discussion in Tomkys, Queensland immigration, p. 89 of the action taken by the Queensland Government in aproaching Victoria and New South Wales for support after the Imperial Government refused to accede to the 1876 legislation.

61 See the remarks by Premier Douglas, in introducing the bill, in *QPD,* 1877, 23, p. 343.

62 The attitude of the British Government towards the Chinese question in Australia was greatly resented not only in Queensland but also in the other Australian colonies as an interference in a purely Australian affair. Certainly, it gave some impetus to the convening of the inter-colonial conference held in Melbourne in 1880 to discuss the issue of Chinese immigration to Australia: see the discussion in Lyng, *Non-Britishers in Australia,* p. 162.

63 See letter Sir Michael Hicks-Beach to Governor Sir A.E. Kennedy in *QVP,* 2, 1878, p. 37.

64 See the discussion by K. Cronin, 'The Chinese community in Quensland, 1874-1900' in *Queensland Heritage,* 8, May 1878, p. 10.

65 See *CHPRA,* 19 September 1877, p. 2.

The Cooktown Courier, as similarly expected, was concerned that the measures would be insufficient to slow the influx of Chinese.[66]

Whether or not the legislation was actually successful in restricting Chinese immigration to Cooktown, or in discouraging the Chinese from working as miners, is difficult to substantiate. Certainly, the consensus in Cooktown several years later was that the legislation of 1877 marked the downwards turning point in the fortunes of the town, attributable to 'the final check ... given to Chinese immigration'.[67] By early 1878 it was being reported that '[t]he Chinese have disappeared in large numbers of late' from the Palmer.[68]

Immigration records of Chinese arrivals at Cooktown between January 1875 and December 1878, as illustrated at Figure 7.1 (over), would also seem to corroborate the perceived nexus between the legislation and the decline in Chinese immigration to Far North Queensland. Indeed, apart from the erratic nature of the influx, due in part presumably to the need to avoid the November typhoon season in East Asian waters, the most obvious trend in Figure 7.1 is the virtual curtailment of Chinese immigration after July 1877.

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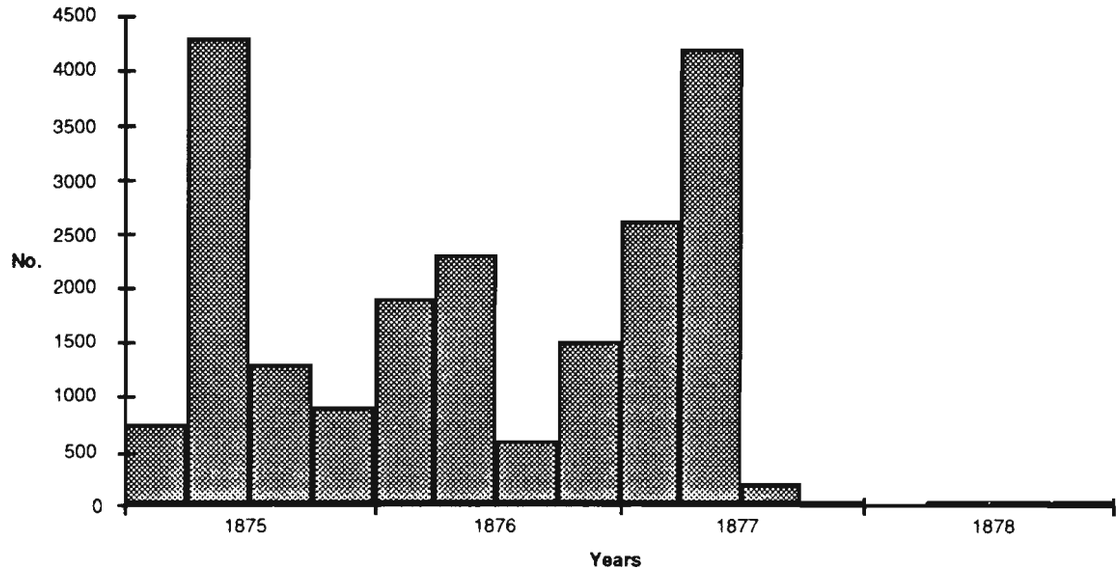
66 *The Cooktown Courier,* 4 July 1877, p. 3 asserted that 'the measure [only] half goes far enough'.

67 See, for example, editorials in *The Cooktown Courier,* 19 April 1879, p. 3 and 24 September 1879, p. 2, both bemoaning — in a considerable shift of opinion from 1877 —that 'from the day the poll tax was introduced we have gradually gone down hill'.

68 *The Cooktown Courier,* 6 February 1878, p. 3.

Figure 7.1 - Chinese Immigrant Arrivals in Cooktown 1875-1878
(showing total numbers per quarter)



Source: Data derived from official immigration returns in successive issues of *QVP*, 1875-79.

Whether or not the falling away of arrivals from July 1877 onwards can be directly attributed to the two restrictive bills of 1877 is less clear. The bills, for example, were not assented to until October 1877. Yet Figure 7.1 suggests that the decline began at least three months before that date. Indeed, given the lead-time that would have been necessary to ready ship-loads of immigrants from Hong Kong, it seems probable that the decline effectively began around April 1877.

It could be argued, of course, that April 1877 was just the time when the Queensland Government was in the process of revising the 1876 version of the legislation, and that Chinese financiers and merchants in Cooktown and Hong Kong 'saw the writing on the wall' and took steps to curtail further immigration ahead of the referral of the legislation to London. The counter to that proposition is that the Chinese in Cooktown or elsewhere would have had no real idea that the legislation would be assented to at its second submission. Moreover, the trend in the last quarter of 1876 — when the first round of legislation was on its way to London — was a three-fold increase in immigration over the June to August quarter.

An alternative explanation for the decline, as was mentioned in Chapter 4, is that the Palmer River goldfields were on the point of being

unviable — in terms of the productivity of individual miners — by around late 1876.[69] It seems possible, therefore, that regardless of (or coincidental with) the legislation of 1876 and 1877, Chinese financiers and merchants in Cooktown and Hong Kong had separately made the decision by early 1877 to cut back or stop the flow of indentured Chinese labourers to Far North Queensland. Whilst no direct evidence has been found to support this contention, its possibility needs to be seen in the context that Chinese immigration to the Palmer — unlike that of Europeans — was largely in the hands of a small business clique, and that the Chinese financiers and businessmen involved would have been unlikely to have continued investing once it became evident that individual miners were increasingly unable to meet the repayment terms of their indenture.[70]

Another explanation, not mutually exclusive of the previous one, is that many of the Chinese immigrants who arrived at Cooktown in early 1877 were perhaps free men, rather than indentured labourers. Whilst there is little evidence to support it, this interpretation would postulate that the influx of indentured labourers in fact began to decline from the first quarter of 1877 and that as many as 5000 of the individuals who arrived in Far North Queensland in the first six months of 1877 were free men, lured by the earlier reports from the Palmer and not privy to the business records-type information available to the influential Chinese clique in Cooktown.[71]

The significance of this possible explanation is that it may help explain why the 'balance sheet' of Chinese arrivals and departures through Cooktown fails to tally with the corresponding estimates of the number of Chinese present at the goldfields, particularly during late 1877 and throughout 1878. Figure 7.2 (over) for example, shows that until the end of 1877, the cumulative balance of Chinese entering and leaving *via* Cooktown approximates the several estimates of the number of Chinese present at the

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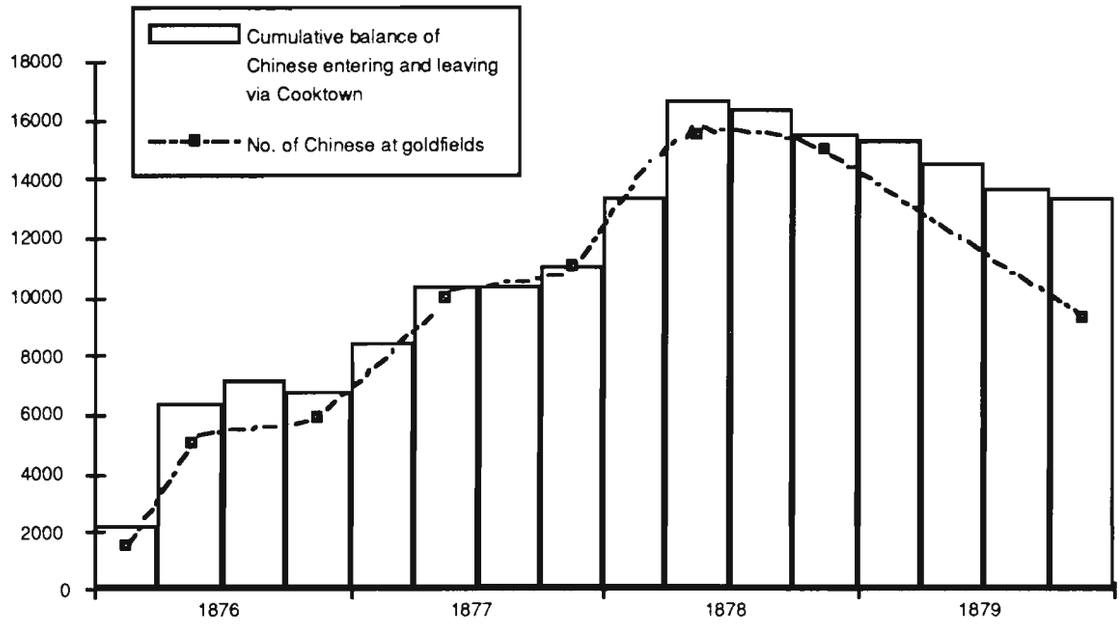
69 See Figure 4.5 at page 160 and its associated discussion, contending that by 1876 the average yield per Chinese miner had fallen to around 20 ounces per year.

70 A counter proposition could be that unscrupulous Chinese financiers would not be unduly worried if indentured labourers were unable to repay their stake, given that the debt with interest would pass to their families in China.

71 A report in *The Cooktown Courier,* 14 March 1877, p. 2 noted that 'Captain O'Neill, of the Killarny, states that ... there were any amount of Chinese waiting for steamers to come to this port'. The inference would seem to be that those awaiting passage were free men, rather than indentured labourers whose movement would have been pre-arranged by their financiers.

various goldfields in Far North Queensland.[72] From January 1878 onwards, however, the gap widens to suggest that around 4000 Chinese immigrants who had entered the colony *via* Cooktown were no longer present at the goldfields.[73]

Figure 7.2 - The Chinese Population at the North Queensland Goldfields 1876-1879



Notes:

1. Cumulative balance of Chinese calculated from immigration returns of arrivals and departures through Cooktown, together with a 'starting balance' of 1500 from southern ports.
2. Number of Chinese at the goldfields derived from estimates provided by various goldfields wardens, as reported in Annual Mining Reports. Note that the numbers are for all occupations, not just miners.
3. Note that the graphs do not reflect the relatively small number of Chinese who arrived at the goldfields either overland or from southern ports nor the number of Chinese who were resident in Cooktown itself across the period.

Source: Data derived from official immigration returns and Annual Mining Reports in successive issues of *QVP*, 1877-79.

Given that indentured Chinese miners would have been unlikely to quit the goldfields to seek employment elsewhere, without the sanction and ongoing support of their Cooktown or Hong Kong-based financier, it seems possible that many of the 'missing' 4000 or so immigrants were perhaps free men who may have arrived in early 1877. Presumably, they

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72 Note 3 to Figure 7.2 makes the point that the graphs do not reflect the relatively small number of Chinese who arrived at the goldfields either overland or from southern ports, nor the number of Chinese (on average about 1500) who were resident in Cooktown across the period.

73 *The Cooktown Courier,* 5 January 1878, p. 3 reported that 'a considerable number have gone seawards to Southern Ports. Large numbers have also gone South overland'.

would have found it easier than indentured workers to move from the goldfields in pursuit of alternative employment in coastal centres or in Brisbane.[74] Importantly also, it could well have been this group of Chinese — permeating southwards in search of work — which galvanised the anti-Chinese movement in other Queensland towns and cities from the late 1870s onwards.

Somewhat paradoxically, at the very time that the anti-Chinese movement was gaining impetus elsewhere in Queensland, its strength in Cooktown began to ebb. In part, that was because the anti-Chinese lobby in Cooktown saw the legislation of 1877 as having been successful in meeting their calls to curtail further Chinese immigration to Far North Queensland. In part also, however, was the growing perception within the town that 'as the Chinese began to leave ... our trade and importance just as rapidly decreased'.[75] By late 1879, even the previously anti-Chinese *The Cooktown Courier* was admitting that

> [w]hen the Chinese were allowed to come without restriction our revenue was greater ... but from the day the poll tax was levied we have gradually gone down hill.[76]

Late 1877 and 1878, therefore, saw the emergence of the view in Cooktown that rather than restrict Chinese immigration and discourage the Chinese from goldmining, the Government should have heeded the earlier and ongoing calls from a wide cross-section of the Cooktown community simply to exclude the Chinese from new goldfields for a period of three or five years after their discovery.[77] The several public meetings held in Cooktown across that period were largely not about the residual 8000 or so Chinese still present in Far North Queensland, but over the issue of

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74 Several hundred Chinese, for example, were reportedly employed in tin mining near Cairns by early 1879: see *The Cooktown Courier,* 17 May 1879, p. 2 asserting that 'fifty Europeans [in that industry] would be more remunerative to the district than 200 Chinese'.

75 *The Cooktown Courier,* 19 April 1879, p. 2.

76 *The Cooktown Courier,* 24 September 1879, p. 2.

77 Kirkman, for example, notes that 'the legislation of 1877 ignored one of the most important demands of the European mining population and the community as a whole: the exclusion of Chinese from new goldfields': Kirkman, 'The Palmer River goldfield', p. 129.

repealing the legislation of 1877 in favour of that which excluded the Chinese from new goldfields for three years.[78]

In the event, *The Gold Fields Act Amendment Act of 1878,* repealing the increased charges for mining licences, was generally hailed with satisfaction in Cooktown, as was the new provision prohibiting the issue of miners licences to Chinese for any goldfield within three years of its discovery.[79] As it became evident, however, that the strength of anti-Chinese feeling in southern Queensland (and the southern colonies) was continuing to grow, and that Parliament was unlikely to repeal the poll tax on new arrivals, the business community in Cooktown gradually resigned itself to the appreciation that other measures would be needed to resurrect the failing fortunes of the town.[80]

Diversifying the Cooktown Economy

What those 'other measures' should be was largely an imponderable to the business community of the town. Some individuals obviously believed that it was the responsibility of the Queensland government to come to the financial rescue of the town, as it supposedly had to Townsville and other coastal ports.[81] Others seemed to believe that the commercial advantages of the port were so obvious that it was only a matter of time before multi-national businesses, such as the Netherlands India Steam Navigation Company, transformed Cooktown into 'the Singapore of the South Pacific'[82] and that, accordingly, it was only necessary for those in

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78 See, for example, the reports of meetings in *The Cooktown Courier,* 27 October 1877, p. 3; 1 May 1878, p. 2 and 31 August 1878, p. 2.

79 See, for example, Kirkman, 'The Palmer River goldfield', pp. 129-30 and Annual Report, Department of Mines in *QVP,* 1879, 2, p. 382 noting that the issue of miners rights to Chinese increased from 345 in the period January to July 1878 to 5404 in the period July to December 1878. That figure approximates the estimate of 5620 licences issued to Chinese miners in 1878 from Table 7.1 at page 323.

80 By the early 1880s, for example, the strength of anti-Chinese sentiment in Brisbane was such that the Premier was popularly able to proclaim his intention 'to make it ten times more difficult for the Chinese to come here': see *QPD,* 1883-84, 41, p. 345.

81 As has been discussed previously, the perceived sense of injustice over government expenditure in Cooktown *vis-à-vis* other towns in Queensland was an ongoing theme from civic and business leaders throughout the mid to late 1870s: see, for example, the editorial in *The Cooktown Courier,* 8 January 1879, p. 2.

82 See, for example, *The Cooktown Courier,* 28 July 1875, p. 3 and *CHPRA,* 13 June 1877, p. 2.

the town 'to hold our own until the era of commercial prosperity dawns on us'.[83]

Others, however, were of the view that it was up to the business community itself to take the initiative and that it was 'to European enterprise that we now [must] look to for advancement'.[84] The underlying tenet was that Cooktown's commercial destiny was as a service centre for its hinterland, with the prosperity of the town dependent upon the flow of trade and workers through its business centre. Rarely did any serious thought seem to be given to the establishment of industries or even processing works *within* Cooktown itself. That presumably was because most of the town's business and civic leaders — Baird, Beardmore, Hodel, Hartley, Hector Menzies, the Walsh brothers and Andrew Thredgold, for example — were merchants or artisans whose entrepreneurial vision was conditioned (and tunnelled) by the boom years of the mid 1870s.

The notion of European 'enterprise', therefore, was typically advanced in the context that more needed to be done to explore and exploit the untapped resources of inland Cape York Peninsula. Local editorials frequently exhorted the business community in Cooktown to sponsor exploration parties into the 'large auriferous-looking and conterminous area of country' to the north of the Palmer River.[85] Other editorials, citing the American experience, urged the government to take on the responsibility of sending

> Botanists, Geologists and Naturalists to prospect the country and report on it ... [with a view to their reports being] made available to every settler.[86]

The reality was that in the mid to late 1870s any prospector worth his salt was engaged in his own exploration work either at the Palmer or Hodgkinson, and was unlikely to be interested in the relatively paltry sums

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83 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 13 March 1878, p. 2.

84 See, for example, the editorial in *The Cooktown Courier,* 8 January 1879, p. 2 noting also that 'our main importations have almost altogether ceased since the stoppage of Chinese immigration'.

85 See, for example, the early calls in *CHPRA,* 29 April 1874, p. 2 and *The Cooktown Courier,* 9 May 1874, p. 3.

86 See, for example, *CHPRA,* 29 April 1874, p. 2 and *The Cooktown Courier,* 20 May 1874, p. 2.

being offered by potential sponsors in Cooktown to look elsewhere.[87] There was also an understandable reluctance on the part of even sponsored prospectors to declare the results of their finds, at least until they had taken the opportunity to glean what they could while their luck or rations lasted.

Similarly, it was not until 1879 — seven years after William Hann's official geological survey from Georgetown towards Coen — that the Government authorised its official geologist, Robert Jack, to re-survey the area between Cooktown and Princess Charlotte Bay to the northwest.[88] In the intervening years, the Government was presumably of the view that the exploration and exploitation of Far North Queensland was proceeding satisfactorily without its involvement. Indeed, the instructions to Robert Jack — couched only in general terms — gave no indication that the Government was placing particular store in his survey, let alone that the future of Cooktown possibly hinged on its results.

Perhaps in part because of the lack of detailed surveys, but certainly in the tradition of their earlier reporting on the Palmer, the newspapers in Cooktown were quick to pin their hopes on the scantiest evidence of new mineral discoveries. As early as 1875, *The Cooktown Herald* was reporting the discovery of coal 'in abundance [and] within easy reach' of the town, which an unidentified but 'distinguished geologist has declared to be the best as yet discovered in the colony'.[89]

By 1876, as the Palmer gold yields showed some sign of slackening, the hyperbole over the coal deposits supposedly located within thirty kilometres of Cooktown stepped up several notches. *The Cooktown Courier,* without the slightest geological evidence, asserted that 'we have large coal deposits [whose] immense importance ... cannot be too highly estimated'.[90] *The Cooktown Herald,* in a similar vein, contended that

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87 James Venture Mulligan, for example, who led six expeditions into the region between 1873 and 1876 was sponsored by miners on the Etheridge for his first expedition and by the Government for £500 on his fifth, but never by the Cooktown business community (although he did receive £180 by way of public subscription from the residents of Cooktown to blaze a trail from Cooktown to the Hodgkinson: see *CHPRA,* 29 March 1876, p. 3).

88 See the account in R.L. Jack, *Northmost Australia,* Vol. 2, Robertson and Company, Melbourne, 1922.

89 See *CHPRA,* 14 July 1875, p. 2 and 23 October 1875, p. 2.

90 *The Cooktown Courier,* 21 June 1876, p. 2.

> ... it is abundant and almost at our doors. [Moreover, it is] a material of infinitely more power in inducing a steady trade and a solid welfare to any community than gold.[91]

By 1879, many in the Cooktown business community were pinning their hopes for the town on the prospect of nearby coal deposits providing an unlimited source of fuel for the passing steamer trade, as well as ready power for the quartz-crushing machinery being ordered for the Palmer reefs.[92] The advocates of a railway line between Cooktown and the Palmer River — notably Andrew Thredgold, Hector Menzies, Edmund Power, Ulrich Mader, William Hartley and Charles Walsh — similarly argued that the presence of coal deposits astride the proposed route provided further justification for the line and, indeed, that transporting coal by rail for shipment from Cooktown 'would prove a most profitable speculation'.[93]

As it turned out, a detailed survey by Robert Jack in September 1879 put paid to any expectations that coal was to be found in the area in commercial quantities. After his report was received by the local authorities, *The Cooktown Courier* advised its readers that

> ... it is much to be regretted that nothing better than an eight-inch coal seam ... has yet been discovered.[94]

The possibility of commercial deposits of tin being found in the vicinity of Cooktown was treated by the local newspapers with similar enthusiasm. After the initial discovery of stream tin at Byerstown in late 1876, *The Cooktown Courier* asserted that the find was 'irrefragable proof of the existence of stanniferous country on the Palmer'.[95] When four tons of ore were transported to Cooktown for on-shipment to Sydney for processing, *The Cooktown Courier* predicted even more confidently that

> ... here then is a source of prosperity, which if developed, will more than counterbalance the

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91 *CHPRA,* 1 January 1876, p. 2.

92 See, for example, the editorial in *The Cooktown Courier,* 25 August 1879, p. 3.

93 *The Cooktown Courier,* 25 August 1879, p. 3. The argued nexus between coal mining and the Cooktown-Maytown railway is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

94 *The Cooktown Courier,* 24 September 1879, p. 2.

95 *The Cooktown Courier,* 4 August 1877, p. 3.

> loss of the Chinese trade, which just now weighs so heavily on our pessimists.[96]

The problem with tin-mining, as developers soon found, was that the costs of transporting and processing the ore exceeded the sale price for refined tin of around £40 per ton. After paying packers £56 per ton to move the ore from the tin-fields to Byerstown, developers then had to pay carriers £6 per ton for its transportation to Cooktown, followed by £1 per ton by ship to Sydney, leaving them 'on the wrong side of the ledger' even before the costs of mining and processing were added.[97] The lesson drawn by the business community in Cooktown was not that a processing facility should be established on-site or at Byerstown, but that

> ... all that we need are road expenditure, capital and population to develop what must ultimately be one of our principal exports.[98]

The Cooktown community also seemed to have little interest in establishing a sawmill in the town, notwithstanding the fact that stands of cedar and sandalwood had earlier been located nearby.[99] In mid 1875, sawmilling machinery reportedly destined for Cooktown was diverted at the last minute by its owners to the Daintree River.[100] Thereafter, Cooktown was largely dependent on the Daintree mill for its sawn timber. Somewhat surprisingly, given the frequent shortages of timber in the town, the business community made no further attempt either to acquire its own mill or encourage the systematic exploitation of local timber resources.[101]

Civic and business leaders similarly took few practical steps to encourage the development of agriculture in the vicinity of the town. As discussed previously, Chinese market gardeners had established a fringe industry of supplying the town with fresh fruit and vegetables by early 1874. But apart from that, no serious attempts were made or encouraged in

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96 *The Cooktown Courier,* 1 August 1877, p. 3.

97 See, for example, the report in *The Cooktown Courier,* 12 September 1877, p. 3.

98 See the editorial in *CHPRA,* 10 October 1877, p. 2.

99 See, for example, the report of 100,000 feet of cedar being shipped south in October 1874, with the expectation that a further half million feet would follow before the end of the year: *CHPRA,* 28 October 1874, p. 2.

100 As reported in *The Cooktown Courier,* 24 July 1875, p. 2.

101 The notable exception was that a group of Chinese shipbuilders constructed a 50-ton fishing boat from local oregon pine in 1877: see *CHPRA,* 30 May 1877, p. 2 noting that the vessel was to be employed in the *bêche-de-mer* trade.

terms of the cultivation of sugar, coffee, tea, rice or other tropical produce, despite not infrequent assertions in the local newspapers to the effect that

> ... our soil is pronounced magnificent ... [and] the labour question can be settled by the importation of coolies from India.[102]

Without belabouring the point too far, it also seems that the business community in Cooktown did little to develop the town as a home-port for the *bêche-de-mer* industry. It is acknowledged that some thirteen boats employing over 450 men were operating from the Endeavour River in the mid to late 1870s.[103] But the extent of the relationship seems largely to have been that Cooktown was simply a victualling point and transhipment port for produce, rather than a home-port in the sense of a base providing processing facilities for produce, as well as a repair and refurbishment capability for the vessels and equipment involved.[104]

The Transition to Reef Mining

Against that backdrop of assorted ventures and opportunities, mooted at various times as having the potential to rescue the Cooktown economy from the doldrums of the late 1870s, was the overlaying and widely-held belief in Cooktown that when the alluvial gold at the Palmer was finally exhausted, the longer-term future of the goldfields lay in reef-mining. As early as February 1875, the local newspapers were extolling 'the unlimited ... wealth in our reefs', with *The Cooktown Herald* typically reporting that

> ... we have every confidence in saying that the reefs of the Palmer ... will equal anything that has ever been tried in Australia.[105]

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102 See, for example, the editorial in *CHPRA,* 11 November 1874, p. 2. A typical theme in later years was that the labour issue could be resolved by diverting the attention 'of the immense hordes of Chinese ... from mining to agriculture': see, for example, *CHPRA,* 1 August 1877, p. 2.

103 As discussed in Chapter 3 under the heading 'Exploitation on the Sea Frontier'.

104 There is also no readily-available evidence to suggest that fishing vessels were owned or operated by businessmen in Cooktown, although it would seem probable that at least some were.

105 *CHPRA,* 6 February 1875, p. 2.

In large part, that optimism seemed to stem from the experiences of the Victorian goldfields and at Gympie, where reef-mining eventually proved more profitable and more enduring than the initial alluvial finds. There were, however, no comprehensive (or even localised) geological surveys carried out at the Palmer during the 1870s, nor any serious evidence produced as to whether the geological structure of the region bore any similarity to that of successful reef-mining areas elsewhere in Australia. Until the results of the first commercial quartz-crushing were made public in February 1876, most of the local optimism seemed based on a combination of wishful thinking and the questionable results of the crushing by dolly of selected pieces of gold-bearing quartz.[106]

Nevertheless, as early as mid 1874, a number of European miners on the Palmer had begun stockpiling mined quartz in anticipation of the eventual arrival of crushing machinery at the goldfields.[107] Most of that activity, though, was by individual miners who were unable to sluice for alluvial gold because of the lack of water at the height of the dry season. In order to generate some income until the arrival of the wet season, those miners had resorted to shallow reef-mining and the dolly-crushing of selected rocks within the limits of their claims.[108]

Indeed, until amended legislation was passed by the Queensland Parliament in January 1875, large-scale reef claims (as opposed to individual alluvial claims) could not be registered until fifty tons of quartz had been crushed — a clearly impossible pre-requisite on new goldfields such as the Palmer.[109] Once that legislative hurdle was overcome, a number of reef claims were registered at the Palmer, with *The Cooktown Herald* reporting in September 1875 that they 'are rapidly raising stone in anticipation of the arrival of machinery'.[110]

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106 In May 1875, for example, gold-laden quartz samples were displayed in a shop window in Cooktown, in an effort to sell shares in the Scotia reef at the Palmer: see the report in *CHPRA,* 22 May 1875, p. 2.

107 See, for example, the report in *The Cooktown Courier,* 11 July 1874, p. 3.

108 *The Cooktown Courier*, 11 July 1874, p. 3 confidently reported that 'what they crushed was picked quartz ... but even so it showed what kind of reefs had been found'.

109 In October 1874, miners at the Palmer petitioned the Government over the issue: see *The Cooktown Courier,* 17 October 1874, p. 4. The amended clause permitted registration of a reef claim after six months of *bona fide* work: see *The Cooktown Courier,* 23 January 1875, p. 2.

110 *CHPRA,* 18 September 1875, p. 2.

Very few of the reef-mines at the Palmer, however, were large enough — or indeed rich enough — to generate from their own resources the working capital necessary for more systematic development.[111] Some local mining companies — financed through share floats — were established, as will be discussed shortly. But unlike Gympie and Charters Towers in the 1880s, where miners and local businessmen actively supported reef-mining companies, there was only ever luke-warm interest in the Cooktown business community in providing the capital necessary to introduce the essential quartz-crushing machinery to the Palmer.[112] In part, that was probably because the Cooktown community simply did not have the available funds. It also seems, though, that many small-scale developers at the Palmer, and businessmen in Cooktown alike, seemed to think (or expect) that southern or overseas investors would flock to the area, sharing their optimism, and that all the risks associated with the introduction of reefing machinery would be borne by others.[113]

When it eventuated that most investment capital required some form of local risk-spreading, typically in the form of the taking up of shares in a registered company, the Cooktown business community was somewhat less forthcoming in its enthusiasm. Similarly, offers such as that from a southern-based entrepreneur to arrange for the acquisition and conveyance to the Palmer of a quartz-crushing battery valued at £2000, in return for a partnership with six locals prepared to subscribe £250 each, usually met with only luke-warm response.[114]

That is not to deny that a considerable amount of investment capital did eventually flow into the region, linked largely to the acquisition of reef-mining machinery.[115] But in the critical years of the mid to late 1870s, the Cooktown business community was only marginally successful in

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111 See, for example, J.R. Laverty, 'Urban development' in W.H. Richmond and P.C. Sharma (eds.), *Mining and Australia,* University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1983, p. 126.

112 See, for example, the discussion of Gympie and Charters Towers in A.L. Lougheed, *The Brisbane stock exchange 1884-1984,* Boolarong, Brisbane, 1984, pp. 13-4, 29 and 35.

113 *The Cooktown Herald,* for example, commented in disparaging terms on one capitalist 'who ... wanted a guarantee of so much stone to be raised before he would risk bringing a machine [to the Palmer]': *CHPRA,* 9 September 1874, p. 2.

114 See the offer reported in *CHPRA,* 14 April 1875, p. 2.

115 By 1880, for example, there were 25 steam-engines, 175 stamp-heads and 300 sluices in Far North Queensland, valued at £70,500: see *QVP,* 1, 1885, p. 1085.

attracting investment capital to the Palmer. In part, that was because of somewhat naive commercial expectations, as mentioned already. In part also, it was because Cooktown and the Palmer were competing with lower-risk investment opportunities elsewhere in Queensland and the southern colonies.[116] In addition, it was because several early investment ventures went rather badly wrong.

Most notable was the failure of the Palmer Quartz Crushing Company. It was a local venture, initiated in March 1875 on the premise that a group of twenty shareholders, contributing £1000 by way of £50 subscriptions, could import a four-stamp quartz-crushing battery from Melbourne or Sydney and then support its upkeep at the Palmer until the first profits were returned.[117] By August 1875, its locally-appointed directors were forced to report to shareholders that the costs involved had been seriously underestimated and that a public float would be needed to raise another £2000.[118]

A month later, the directors were able to report that all the shares had been taken up and that the salaried manager — a Mr Love, who had made several trips back and forth between Cooktown and the southern colonies at company expense — was now about to organise local carriers to transport the expected machinery from Cooktown to the Palmer River. After a series of inexplicable delays, the onset of the wet season stymied any possibility that the still-awaited machinery could be transported to the goldfields before about March the following year.

By then, however, the company was on the verge of insolvency and, by June 1876, was in financial ruin. The unfortunate consequence, as pointed out by *The Cooktown Herald,* was that the town's first attempt to float a company should result in failure

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116 See, for example, Butlin's discussion of the impact of the wool boom in N.G. Butlin, *Investment in Australian economic development 1861-1900,* Cambridge University Press, London, 1964, p. 35. It was also because British investment capital did not start to flood into Queensland until the late 1870s and early 1880s: see the discussion in G. Blainey, *The rush that never ended: a history of Australian mining,* Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1993, p. 97.

117 See the first mention of the proposal in *CHPRA,* 10 March 1875, p. 2.

118 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 25 August 1875, p. 3.

> ... since failure at the outset ... will most assuredly militate very strongly against the prosperity of the district at large.[119]

In early 1876, the St George and Albion Company similarly followed the Palmer Quartz Crushing Company into financial ruin.[120] Obviously, not all local initiatives resulted in failure, nor was the enthusiasm of local investors seemingly dented by the several endeavours which did fail.[121] Nevertheless, it does appear that the generally poor performance of locally-initiated ventures reinforced to the Cooktown business community that 'we must necessarily look to the older established colonies for assistance'.[122] The underlying sentiment seemed to be that the likely financial saviours of the Palmer River goldfields would prove to be London or southern investors 'who [would] find in Cooktown ... ample scope for the profitable investment of their surplus capital'.[123]

Even when such investment capital was forthcoming, however, it is evident that investors and the Cooktown business community alike seriously underestimated the practical difficulties of transporting quartz-crushing machinery between Cooktown and the Palmer. In mid 1875, a flurry of local editorials reported the pending arrival of several crushing machines from southern ports, with confident predictions that 'the prospect of a large increase in our export of gold draws nearer ... as the machinery ... will soon be erected'.[124] In the event, it was not until February 1876 that the first quartz-crushing machinery commenced operation at Edwardstown (on the eastern-most edge of the Palmer), and almost a year later again before machinery was operating at the Palmer proper.[125]

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119 *CHPRA,* 25 December 1875, p. 2.

120 See the report of the meeting of disgruntled shareholders in *CHPRA,* 9 February 1876, p. 2.

121 See the report in September 1876, for example, that fifty-seven of the seventy-two £25 shares in the Lord Nelson Gold Mining and Quartz Crushing Company were taken up within days of the public float being announced: *The Cooktown Courier,* 6 September 1876, p. 3.

122 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 8 January 1876, p. 2.

123 *CHPRA,* 12 September 1877, p. 2. The reality was, of course, that in the 1870s, investors typically would only provide capital to projects which had already shown promise through locally-supported endeavours.

124 See, for example, *CHPRA,* 10 July 1875, p. 2 and *The Cooktown Courier,* 21 July 1875, p. 3.

125 See *CHPRA,* 23 February 1876, p. 2 and 13 January 1877, p. 2.

In part, the difficulties related to conveying heavy and cumbersome machinery over narrow and irregular tracks by bullock-wagons, a near impossible task during most of the wet season.[126] The added difficulty, particularly in the boom months of 1875 and early 1876, was that carriers were demanding rates per ton — typically around £70 — which were almost prohibitive in terms of transporting a 25 or 30 ton piece of machinery to the Palmer.[127] The associated problem was that even at those rates, many carriers could not be induced to transport machinery, preferring instead loads which could be man-handled on or off a wagon in the event of a broken wheel or the wagon becoming bogged.[128]

The result was that an amount of machinery never got beyond Cooktown.[129] Moreover, that which ultimately reached the Palmer usually did so at an exorbitant cost to its owners, with obvious implications for profits. Some of the early yields from stock-piled quartz were among the richest of any goldfield in Australia to that time.[130] But the average yield of around three ounces per ton in 1878 — while still marginally better than Charters Towers — was not sufficiently lucrative to warrant the outlay of around £2000 per machine in transportation costs alone between Cooktown and the Palmer.[131] Indeed, while remoteness, difficulty of access and the hostile environment clearly and adversely affected reef mining at the Palmer, the conclusion to be drawn is that the Palmer reefs were simply neither sufficiently extensive nor rich to attract the capital needed for successful long-term reef mining.

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126 In the dry season of 1877, however, the scarcity of water and lack of grass made it 'next to impossible to procure cartage' at the Palmer: *CHPRA,* 7 July 1877, p. 2.

127 One of the problems facing the Palmer Quartz Crushing Company was that carriers wanted £900 to move one machine to the Palmer: *CHPRA,* 3 November 1875, p. 2.

128 The other dimension is that a number of carriers preferred shorter haul tasks to fields other than the Palmer: see the complaint in *The Cooktown Courier,* 5 September 1877, p. 3.

129 See the report, for example, of a Hodgkinson-bound traction engine which, after numerous delays on the road from Cooktown, was eventually 'returned to Cooktown for shipment to Port Douglas, whence it will be forwarded to its destination': *The Cooktown Courier,* 23 January 1878, p. 3.

130 The Alexandra mine on the Palmer, for example, returned a yield of 524 ounces of gold for 82 1/2 tons of quartz crushed, an average of over six ounces per ton: see *The Cooktown Courier,* 25 September 1878, p. 2.

131 See the editorial in *The Cooktown Courier,* 9 October 1878, p. 2 following the visit by John Macrossan MLA to the Palmer. Earlier in 1878, Hodgkinson reef-mines were returning an average of two ounces per ton, while those at Charters Towers were consistently averaging under two ounces per ton: see *The Cooktown Courier,* 23 January 1878, p. 3 and 30 January 1878, p. 3.

The Cooktown to Palmer Railway Line

From about late 1878, therefore, earlier calls from the business community in Cooktown for a railway line extending towards the Palmer were augmented by the justification that the viability of reef-mining was critically dependent upon a cheaper mode of transportation between Cooktown and the goldfields. In arguing in Parliament on 10 July 1879 for a Cooktown-Palmer railway, the local member — John Walsh — based his case solely around the future prospects of the goldfields, boldly predicting that

> ... it would be more profitable than any railway to the interior of the country at the present time.[132]

When the idea of a railway line to the Cooktown hinterland had first been mooted two years beforehand, however, its justification had been much less certain. The then local member, William Murphy, had based his request to Parliament for £3000 for the survey of a line between Cooktown and Byerstown primarily on the precedent that Parliament had already approved funding for similar surveys in other districts and 'our wants are similar to those elsewhere'.[133]

The fact that Murphy had not consulted with his constituents before raising the issue in Parliament caused some consternation in the Cooktown business community, an omission compounded by the view of those who argued that the priority was not a railway but '[the] formation of good and permanent roads, with easy gradients'.[134] Perhaps because of the differing local views on the need or otherwise for a railway, and presumably so as not to jeopardise the separate vote for road formation, the argument to the Government in the ensuing months turned primarily on the assertion that since Parliament had approved over one million pounds on six new railway lines elsewhere in the colony, Cooktown reasonably deserved similar treatment.[135]

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132 As reported in *The Cooktown Courier,* 19 July 1879, p. 2.
133 As reported in *CHPRA,* 23 September 1876, p. 2.
134 See *CHPRA,* 26 August 1876, p. 2.
135 See, for example, *CHPRA,* 1 September 1877, p. 2.

By early 1877, as the alluvial output of the Palmer passed its peak and as the commercial prosperity of Cooktown began to fade, an increasing number of small businessmen in the town began to voice their concerns that the slowdown was attributable to the prevailing exorbitant rates of cartage between Cooktown and the Palmer.[136] Moreover, their view — as expressed in a petition to Parliament in June 1877 — was that a railway line between Cooktown and Byerstown would not only substantially reduce the cost of transporting goods to the goldfields 'but also yield a profit on the outlay'.[137]

A month later and some nine months after the issue was first raised by the local member, Parliament approved the allocation of £3000 for the survey of a prospective line between Cooktown and Byerstown.[138] Nine months later again, with no activity by the Government in the interim, the mayor of Cooktown — then Hector Menzies — convened what was to be the second in a series of public meetings aimed at prompting the authorities into action.

That meeting, like the first in June 1877, attempted to provide justification for a railway on the basis of a detailed but hastily-prepared cost analysis. The risk in that approach — with the benefit of hindsight — is that the published calculations would not only have been open to detailed scrutiny by the authorities in Brisbane but, over time, would also have exemplified the fading commercial fortunes of the town. The June 1877 report, for example, asserted that each week some 430 tons of goods were transported inland from Cooktown and that 500 individuals left Cooktown destined for the goldfields.[139] By April 1878, the estimate of freight was down to 110 tons per week, while the number of potential passengers had decreased to the point of not being included in the calculations.[140]

Almost a year later, with still no action on the survey, a group of civic-minded supporters formed the Cook and Burke Railway League,

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136 See, for example, *CHPRA,* 14 March 1877, p. 2.

137 See *CHPRA,* 16 June 1877, p. 2.

138 See *QVP,* 2, 1877, p. 167.

139 See the report in *The Cooktown Courier,* 13 June 1877, p. 3. Its conclusion was that the railway would return £57,200 per year, less operating expenses estimated at around £7,000.

140 See the report in *The Cooktown Courier,* 27 April 1878, p. 3. Its conclusion was that the railway would return a profit of £14,500 per year, less operating expenses of £7,000.

arguing that 'our greatest faults hitherto have been the want of energy combined with unity'.[141] The local member, John Walsh, was clearly unimpressed, advising a civic deputation in April 1879 that

> ... it was no use them going in for absurd requests, such as the railway. The proposed railway would be looked upon down South as a perfect swindle.[142]

Even though Walsh was personally sceptical of the need for a railway, it does seem that he was prepared to push the proposal in Parliament, arguing it — as mentioned previously — on the basis that 'he could now produce figures to show ... beyond doubt ... that the [reef mines at] Palmer and Hodgkinson goldfields were merely in their infancy'.[143] Parliament, however, was obviously unconvinced of his argument, declining to include any expenditure in the August 1879 loan estimates (yet allocating £390,000 for railway construction at Townsville and Charters Towers).[144]

Not surprisingly, the Government's lack of support caused an uproar in the Cooktown business community. In the subsequent exchange of telegrams between Walsh and the mayor of Cooktown, then Andrew Thredgold, it was decided to seek a supplementary bid, adding the justification of the supposed coal deposits located between Cooktown and the Palmer.[145] After a flurry of hurried survey work and more telegrams, culminating in Jack's advice that the coal seam was no larger than eight inches, Walsh advised the town that 'this precludes any possibility of getting [the] railway this session'.[146]

Walsh was able, however, to obtain a conditional pledge from the Government that £30,000 would be made available for construction to commence in 1880, provided that commercially-viable deposits of coal were located in the meantime.[147] It is also evident that Walsh's patience with his constituents was by that time at a low ebb. In informing a public meeting in Cooktown of the allocation of £30,000, Walsh told his audience that

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141 *The Cooktown Courier,* 22 March 1879, p. 2.
142 As reported in *The Cooktown Courier,* 19 April 1879, p. 3.
143 As reported in *The Cooktown Courier,* 19 July 1879, p. 2.
144 As reported in *The Cooktown Courier,* 6 August 1879, p. 2 and 13 August 1879, p. 2.
145 See *The Cooktown Courier,* 30 August 1879, p. 2.
146 As reported in *The Cooktown Courier,* 27 August 1879, p. 2.
147 *The Cooktown Courier,* 3 September 1879, p. 2.

> ... he was so ashamed [of the contents of their petition to Parliament] ... that he could not ask for it to be read. [Furthermore] ... he was not their delegate to be ordered about but would do what he thought best.[148]

Needless to say, the mutual lack of confidence between Walsh and his constituents resulted in further delays, and periods of inactivity as the Cooktown business community slid further into economic decline. In December 1879, the survey towards Byerstown was abandoned, as it had become obvious that the route would involve costly bridge-work and the traverse of extremely rugged terrain.[149] After further delays, a more practicable route *via* the Normanby River was agreed, taking the line to Laura and then towards Maytown. The pledge of £30,000 had meanwhile lapsed, in the absence of any attempts by the Cooktown community to prove the existence of coal deposits astride the proposed route.

Eventually, in October 1882, plans for the first section of railway between Cooktown and Laura were approved by Parliament and £100,000 allocated for its construction.[150] A year later, the Government called for tenders, ultimately awarding the project to George Bashford in February 1884.[151] The section to Laura was officially opened on 8 October 1888, only days before the Minister for Railways conceded in Parliament that there was little likelihood of the remaining sections ever being completed.[152] Indeed, the Cooktown-Laura section was effectively defunct before it was completed, with its only real traffic having been the workers and materials used in its construction.

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148 As reported in *The Cooktown Courier,* 13 September 1879, p. 2.

149 See the discussion in J. Kerr, 'North Queensland mining railways' in Kennedy, *North Queensland mining history,* p. 277. Note, however, that a report in *The Cooktown Courier,* 17 December 1879, p. 2 claimed that the main reason for the abandonment of the route to Byerstown was that the opening of Cairns and Port Douglas 'had brought the Hodgkinson within comparatively easy access of the coast' via those centres.

150 See the discussion in *QPD,* 38, 1882-83, pp. 968-9.

151 For a good account of the project, see J.W. Knowles, *The Cooktown railway,* 3rd edition, Australian Railway History Society (Queensland Division), Brisbane, 1984. For correspondence relating to the first section of the railway, see Treasury Department, in-letter 4093/84 of 1884, TRE/A27, Queensland State Archives.

152 See *QPD,* 55, 1888-89, pp. 780-6.

The View from Brisbane

Obviously, with the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to question why the authorities in Brisbane agreed to allocate over £100,000 to the Cooktown-Laura railway, having resisted persistent calls for funding for the project over the previous five years. Certainly, there is no evidence to suggest that the Government seriously believed that a railway line to Laura — or even to Maytown — would revive the sagging fortunes of either the Palmer River goldfields or Cooktown.

Indeed, given that the problems of the mid to late 1870s had related primarily to the transportation costs of getting machinery and goods to the Palmer (and further distributed within the sizeable length and breadth of the goldfields), it is difficult to believe that the authorities in Brisbane could seriously have thought that a railway line to Laura — only part of the way to the Palmer and constructed a decade later — would have had any relevance to the earlier problem.

Moreover, even the most cursory examination of such statistics as passenger arrivals and departures, cargo tonnages, customs receipts, gold production, business licences issued, sales of crown land, school enrolments and hospital admissions, over the period 1875 to 1882, would have indicated to any Brisbane-based bureaucrat or parliamentarian that Cooktown by 1882 was effectively a dying town. Furthermore, there were no serious proposals forthcoming from the business community in Cooktown to suggest that a railway line to Laura had any real prospect of reviving the commercial viability of the town or its hinterland.

The most obvious explanation would seem to be that funding for the railway came about simply through the process of bureaucratic inertia. That is, the railway was eventually approved as the final step in a bureaucratic process begun half a dozen years earlier, when the issue was first put forward by the local member for loan estimates consideration. Because all the intervening steps had been completed — the survey carried out, plans drawn up and cost estimates produced — it was arguably inevitable that the project would eventually be approved.

That explanation, however, seems somewhat simplistic. It also probably takes insufficient account of the political dimensions of government decision-making, particularly for something as vote-catching as railway construction. Yet it is not clear from the available evidence what, if any, the political considerations involved in the funding of the Cooktown railway may have been. It seems unlikely, for example, that the Government approved the expenditure as a sop to the Northern separatist movement. Nor does it seem that the Government was pork-barrelling the Cook electorate, or trying to win the support of local members on another issue or in terms of the balance of power. In advising the Government's pledge of £30,000 in late 1879, John Walsh reported to his constituents that the 'government do not require our support ... but are anxious to act fairly for Cook'.[153]

Clearly, the possibility cannot be discounted that the Government approved the funding primarily on the basis that it represented simply an equitable distribution of expenditure between the various districts. The funding decision was also made at the time when the Queensland Government's development strategy was focused heavily on railway construction, not only in terms of infrastructure development but also in the context of the associated boost to immigration and land settlement[154] . Butlin contends that not infrequently

> ... lines were extended in an atmosphere almost of desperation to provide the communication facilities necessary for development and to attract population. [Moreover] ... there was little question of fixing a final destination ... [rather] building was to continue as far inland as resources would permit.[155]

There is also some evidence to suggest that Parliament was swayed by the views of John Macrossan, a long-time supporter of the North Queensland mining industry and then Government minister, who asserted in October 1882 that '[there] was no more important district [than Cook] in the whole of Queensland'.[156] Less easily explained would be why the

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153 As reported in *The Cooktown Courier,* 3 September 1879, p. 2.

154 See Butlin, *Investment in Australian ... development,* p. 358.

155 Butlin, *Investment in Australian ... development,* pp. 331-2.

156 *QPD,* 38, 1882-83, pp. 968-9. See also the view that Macrossan's resignation from the ministry in early 1883 'no doubt influenced the downgrading of the Cooktown railway's priority': Kerr, 'North Queensland mining railways', p. 277.

Government had waited at least five years before deciding to act.[157] Another explanation, not exclusive of any already discussed, is that the Government eventually approved the £100,000 expenditure largely to rid itself of the constant complaining from Cooktown that the town had been unfairly treated by the authorities in Brisbane.

From Boom to Bust

In the event, the demise of the Cooktown to Laura railway came to symbolise the demise of Cooktown itself. Its proponents were largely the European merchants and artisans of the Cooktown business community, whose blinkered vision saw only the possibility that a railway would revive the flow of visitors and supplies through the town. But having blamed their failing fortunes on everything from the curtailment of Chinese immigration to the lack of investment capital, the railway was their last card. Once it had been played, and once it became evident that even a railway was not about to revitalise the town's commercial prosperity, Cooktown was effectively spent.

The unfortunate aspect — in terms of the long-term future of Cooktown — is that the town was seemingly never able to attract civic and business leaders with a broader vision than that possessed by the small-scale European traders and artisans who typified its business community in the mid to late 1870s. That presumably was because the entrepreneurs of the day — with occasional exceptions such as Robert Towns, and some in Charters Towers — were to be found in Sydney and Melbourne, and the other capitals, rather than small towns on the eastern seaboard.[158] Moreover, the colonial administration in Brisbane had neither the experience nor probably the inclination to take a more interventionist role in the structural viability of fledgling townships in the colony's northern reaches.

Similarly, because the business community of the town comprised mainly small-scale traders and artisans, no-one — with the probable exception of several of the key Chinese merchants — had the capital

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157 In the early 1880s, investment capital from Britain was far more readily available than it had been in the early to mid 1870s: see Butlin, *Investment in Australian ... development,* p. 350.

158 There undoubtedly was a number of Chinese entrepreneurs in Cooktown. But they had little interest in the longer term viability of the town.

necessary to develop the resources of the region. The business community at large also had very little experience in dealing with financial institutions or 'big business' elsewhere. Accordingly, Cooktown was not able easily to attract outside investors to the region nor, indeed, to access finance for use by local developers. The result was that once the initial boom of the early 1870s began to wane, the Cooktown business community was ill-equipped to arrest the town's economic decline. By 1885, twelve years after the first settlers had arrived, Cooktown's economy had gone 'from boom to bust'.

CHAPTER 8 - CONCLUSIONS

This study does not pretend to be a comprehensive history of the first decade or so of Cooktown. A reader from the modern-day town may therefore be disappointed that its thematic approach somewhat clouds the chronology of progress more evident in the narrative-type histories of some Queensland towns. Others, with a genealogical interest in certain of the town's early personalities, may similarly find that the study dwells only fleetingly on the day-to-day lifestyle and achievements of its early citizens.

Quite deliberately, though, this study is less about Cooktown as a local history, than an examination of the relationship between the town and its hinterland, and the role of both in the wider development of Queensland in the 1870s and early 1880s. In that context, its focus has been on the extent to which the traditional themes of local, regional and Queensland history have fitted the Cooktown experience, with the view being to establish where the town's early history either supports or challenges the current interpretations.

Overlaying that focus has been the central hypothesis of the study, relating to the demise of the town in the late 1870s and the associated issues of why it failed to diversify, why successive governments in Brisbane failed to detect the decline until it was almost a *fait accompli* and why business and civic leaders in Cooktown continued to talk up the town's long-term prospects. Before addressing those key questions, it would probably be useful to summarise the findings in relation to the traditional interpretations.

Early Race Relations

A central argument of Chapter 3 is that an escalating cycle of racial conflict was underway in Far North Queensland long before the first white settlers arrived at Cooktown in October 1873. Accounts of such pre-settlement racial conflict have obviously been mentioned by a number of earlier researchers. But the assertion made in this study is that whereas it was the settlers in many other 'frontiers' in Australia who were responsible for dispossessing local Aborigines of their land and livelihood, it was largely

the explorers of Far North Queensland — beginning with Captain Cook in July 1770 — who 'set the stage' for the racial conflict which was ultimately to result in the destruction of Aboriginal society in the Cooktown-Palmer River area.

Moreover, Chapter 3 points out the irony that the early explorers should have posed no direct or lasting threat to the Aboriginal people. Unlike the later miners and settlers, who had a marked impact on the traditional lifestyle of the local Aboriginal groups — at least in the vicinity of Cooktown and the Palmer River, and along the route in between — by scattering native game, monopolising or befouling water sources and depleting plant life, the impact of the explorers should have been minimal. Yet the pre-settlement history of race relations in the Cooktown area is a litany of violent, usually one-sided clashes and gross abuses by white explorers of the Aboriginal system or reciprocity.

Stepping forward to the post-settlement period, several commentators — principally Noel Loos and Henry Reynolds — have noted that as thousands of European and Chinese miners flooded into the Cooktown-Palmer River area from late 1873 onwards, the ensuing racial conflict was more violent, and with an Aboriginal response more purposeful, than arguably anywhere else in Australia.[1] This study, while supporting the assertion, advances the possibility — again in support of the pre-settlement 'setting the stage' argument — that the intensity of racial violence in the Cooktown-Palmer River was attributable in part to the unusually long period of intermittent pre-settlement contact, spanning close to 100 years, which may have led local Aborigines to believe that they — unlike Aborigines elsewhere in Australia — were able to keep the invading whites from their traditional lands.

That is not to deny, of course, the explanation advanced by Loos that it was the terrain of the dense tropical rainforest to the east of the Great Dividing Range which facilitated Aboriginal resistance, by providing a refuge against the superior technology and political organisation of the

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1 See, for example, N. Loos, 'A chapter of contact: Aboriginal-European relations in North Queensland 1606-1991 in H. Reynolds, *Race relations in North Queensland,* James Cook University, Townsville, 1978, p. 8 and H. Reynolds, *The other side of the frontier: Aboriginal resistance to the European invasion of Australia,* Penguin, Ringwood, 1982, p. 198.

white invaders.[2] Certainly, the central conclusion of Chapter 3 is that racial conflict in the Cooktown area needs to be seen in the context of a self-perpetuating but ultimately one-sided cycle of violence, exacerbated by the prevailing European notions of racial superiority and by the relative vulnerability of white and Chinese trespassers to Aboriginal 'guerilla' tactics.

It should also be said that the 'setting the stage' argument is not meant to imply that responsibility for the destruction of traditional Aboriginal society in the Cooktown-Palmer area should be attributed to the early explorers, rather than the later settlers and miners. Nor is it meant to suggest that the settlers and miners in Far North Queensland were in some way less blameworthy than say early settlers on the Darling Downs were for the destruction of Aboriginal society there. Indeed, whereas pastoralists elsewhere often had compelling reasons to attempt some degree of harmonious relations with local Aborigines,[3] the miners of Far North Queensland had neither the need of Aboriginal labour nor any location-tied sense of vulnerability in relation to themselves, their stock or their property. In consequence, their reaction towards the local Aborigines was often amongst the most brutal in Australia.

That leads to the third traditional interpretation, as raised in the introductory chapter, that the number of Aborigines, Europeans and Chinese killed in racial conflict in the Cooktown-Palmer area numbered in the high hundreds, if not thousands. Chapter 3 refutes many of the gross exaggerations of losses on both sides, perpetuated primarily by Hector Holthouse in *River of gold.*[4] It also refutes the equally fanciful accounts of the violation of white women by Aborigines, as well as the alleged cannibalistic preference of Aborigines for Chinese rather than European miners.

The conclusion in this study — supporting the 1982 assessment by Noel Loos — is that more whites and Chinese died in Cooktown from

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2 Loos, 'A chapter of contact', pp. 16-7.

3 See, for example, the discussion of the harmonious relations established by the Archer brothers of Eidsvold in W.R. Johnston, *A new province? The closer settlement of Monto,* Boolarong, Brisbane, 1982, p. 3.

4 See H. Holthouse, *River of gold: the story of the Palmer River gold rush,* Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1967.

sickness and accidents in each year from 1874 to 1879 than died in total at the hands of Aborigines in the hinterland during the whole of the 1870s. The number of Aborigines directly killed by whites and native police in the 1870s was similarly not as high as many accounts have suggested. That is not to understate the profound impact that the loss of around 250 men, women and children would have had on the tribal groups living astride the route between Cooktown and the Palmer. But, as argued in Chapter 3, the greater losses were to occur over the following three decades, as local Aborigines were decimated by exposure to European and Chinese diseases, while others fell prey to the ills of alcohol or opium addiction.

One positive note from the analysis in Chapter 3 — if indeed one can attribute anything 'positive' to the destruction of traditional Aboriginal society — is that the intensity of racial conflict in the Cooktown-Palmer River area lends further weight to the modern view of a white invasion of Australia, against the earlier notion of *terra nullius*. A second is that the analysis of race relations in this study may go some way towards moderating the *Boys Own*-type accounts of the demise of Aborigines at the hands of 'heroic' white explorers and prospectors, perpetuated in *River of gold*.

The *Raison D'être* of a Frontier Mining Town

The popular perception has been that the township of Cooktown was established, on the instructions of the authorities in Brisbane, as the service centre and market outlet for the Palmer River goldfields. The analysis in Chapter 2, however, suggests that the Queensland Government initially saw Cooktown as a temporary resupply point for the Palmer River goldfields, largely *via* the route marked out by the explorer William Hann in late 1872. Certainly, it seems that a key element in the Government's despatch of an expedition to the Endeavour River in October 1873 was to open a track from the coast to the Palmer in order to avoid an embarrassing repeat of what occurred at Canoona in 1858, where thousands of would-be miners had been left stranded when their money and rations ran out.

One of the consequences was that the physical location of Cooktown had little to do with the suitability of its site for settlement or of the immediate region to sustain a township. In that regard, Cooktown was

little different from a number of other coastal towns in Queensland. The site of Townsville, for example, was selected primarily on the basis 'that it offered the best and quickest route ... to the interior and a reasonable harbour'.[5] And Gladstone, like Cooktown, suffered severely in its early years from a lack of fresh water.[6]

Cooktown's tenuous *raison d'être* also meant that the early settlement struggled to survive, as monsoonal rains in early 1874 cut its road links to the Palmer, and as vested interests elsewhere pressured the Government to consider alternative points of access. Those very pressures, of course, were because the likes of Cairns, Port Douglas and Smithfield were also struggling to survive.[7] Townsville similarly had a precarious early existence.[8] Newly-established coastal towns in the other colonies frequently faced similar difficulties, with early businessmen in Bunbury in Western Australia, for example 'struggl[ing] to find solid foundations on which to build predictions of a prosperous future'.[9]

Chapter 2 concludes, therefore, that while Cooktown's tenuous *raison d'être* may well have contributed to its early precarious existence, the town was not unique in the uncertainty over its future. Indeed, Cooktown was probably no different from a host of other Australian coastal towns, established in the nineteenth century, which struggled in their formative years to attract recognition and funding from their respective colonial or state capital.

The associated view has been that coastal and frontier mining towns like Cooktown struggled to survive not least because of the unwillingness of successive governments in Brisbane to promote regional development. That view, of course, is not confined to Queensland. Garden's study of Albany, for example, discusses 'the perceived centralist tendencies of the Western Australian Government' and the town's attempt in the 1860s

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5 See D.M. Gibson-Wilde, *Gateway to a golden land: Townsville to 1884,* James Cook University, Townsville, 1984, p. 32.

6 See L. McDonald, *Gladstone: city that waited,* Boolarong, Brisbane, 1988, p. 107.

7 See D. Jones, *Trinity Phoenix: a history of Cairns and district,* Cairns Post, Cairns, 1976, p. 116.

8 Gibson-Wilde, *Townsville to 1884,* p. 57.

9 See A.J. Barker and M. Laurie, *Excellent connections: a history of Bunbury Western Australia 1836-1990,* City of Bunbury, Bunbury, 1992, p. 104.

to separate and become part of South Australia.[10] Disgruntled residents of Bunbury, during the same period, similarly adopted the attitude that 'a government raising revenue from dues ... should be ploughing that revenue [back] into appropriate improvements'.[11]

The analysis in Chapter 6 supports the view of the early Cooktown community that their region contributed more to the colonial coffers than it received back by way of government expenditure. But there is little evidence to suggest that successive Queensland governments were deliberately biased against regional development or against development in Far North Queensland. More likely, it seems, is that the authorities in Brisbane were simply cynical as to the longer-term viability of frontier mining towns, having already experienced the demise of several such earlier towns. It is also evident that Cooktown suffered because of 'the tyranny of distance' between it and a bureaucracy located some 1600 kilometres to its south. For the authorities in Brisbane, the development needs of a distant Cooktown were not a high priority.

The Process of Small Town Urbanisation

Closely allied to the issue of the *raison d'être* of the early settlement has been the traditional view that Cooktown started life as a fledgling township, with a typical range of government representation and services, and that the town's growth was in broad conformity with patterns of urbanisation elsewhere. What emerges from Chapter 4 is that the Government initially saw the town primarily as the entry point at which to extract duty and taxes on goods destined for the Palmer. Government expenditure, therefore, tended to relate to revenue collection, such as customs, and harbour and wharfage facilities. Moreover, the majority of early settlers were service providers — publicans, storekeepers, carriers, import agents and the like — which resulted in the town developing more as a business centre than a residential community.

In that regard, the large number of hotels in early Cooktown — typically in the ratio of one hotel to every 45 residents — could be cited as evidence of its business focus and the role it played as an entertainment and

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10 See D.S. Garden, *Albany: a panorama of the sound from 1827,* Nelson, West Melbourne, 1977, p. 155.

11 Barker and Laurie, *A history of Bunbury,* p. 122.

service centre for the Palmer. Yet other studies suggest that a number of contemporary Australian towns had a similarly large ratio of hotels to residents. In Narrandera, for example, there was one hotel for every fifty people at the 1881 census.[12] And Broken Hill had forty-seven hotels within two years of its establishment in 1886.[13]

The paucity of churches in early Cooktown, as opposed to the number of recreational facilities, could similarly be cited as evidence of the town's focus on materialism, and the preoccupation of its residents with sport and entertainment rather than traditional family values. Again, other studies suggest that Cooktown was not that different from a number of towns elsewhere. Townsville, for example, had no resident clergyman for its first two years.[14] In Albany, 'it was many years before a church of any denomination was established'.[15] And Lillydale, in Victoria, once had three racecourses within the town and another seven in the surrounding district.[16]

Indeed, the main differences between Cooktown and towns elsewhere in Queensland and Australia, in terms of small town urbanisation, seem to relate not so much to the physical dimensions of growth but to the social aspects of community development. In Cooktown, for example, there was a noticeably marked gender imbalance, particularly in the early years of settlement. It could be argued, of course, that a male-dominated society was only to be expected in any newly-established frontier town. Yet in Townsville, that was not the case. Gibson-Wilde points out that a number of married miners moved their families there before setting off alone for goldfields elsewhere.[17]

The studies of Gladstone, Bunbury and Albany, as already cited, similarly give no particular indication that their early communities were male-dominated to the extent that Cooktown's was. The reason, in Cooktown's case, seems to relate primarily to the contemporary perception

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12 See B. Gammage, *Narrandera Shire,* Narrandera Shire Council, Narrandera, 1986, p. 131.

13 See G. Blainey, *The rise of Broken Hill,* Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1968, p. 27.

14 Gibson-Wilde, *Townsville to 1884,* p. 67.

15 Garden, *Albany,* p. 89.

16 See M. Aveling, *Lillydale: the Billanook country 1837-1972,* Gray Hunt, Carlton, 1972, p. 44.

17 Gibson-Wilde, *Townsville to 1884,* p. 136.

of the town as a resupply port of uncertain tenure, rather than a fledgling settlement offering challenges and new opportunities for young families. The associated aspect, as will be mentioned again shortly, was the extremely high turnover of the town's population. The main consequence of both gender imbalance and population turnover, as discussed in Chapter 5, was that the town's early focus remained transfixed on short-term business opportunities, at the expense of the development of neighbourhood and community spirit.

The introductory chapter also mentioned the traditional view that early settlers in Cooktown attempted to replicate building design from their home counties in the United Kingdom, and adopted a number of English customs and practices, such as the use of stone channelling and kerbs. To some extent, it would be surprising if the early residents had done otherwise. In general terms, however, the analysis in Chapter 4 suggests that many of the dwellings erected in Cooktown in the early 1870s in fact reflected some adaption to the physical environment, most notably in relation to verandahs and the raising of buildings on wooden stumps.[18] The extensive use of stone for roadworks in the town also seems to have been largely a matter of making the best use of an available local resource, rather than a deliberate attempt to replicate urban infrastructure from England.

The Wider Role of Mining Towns

It has been almost conventional wisdom that the Palmer River gold-rush not only attracted a large number of Chinese to Queensland, and Europeans from elsewhere in Australia, but was important also in drawing a considerable number of prospective residents to the colony from Great Britain and Ireland. The fact that Queensland's population increased from some 125,000 in 1871 to 181,288 by 1876, and that the population of North Queensland increased across the same period from the low hundreds to in excess of 19,000, would seem to support that view.

Certainly, most of the 20,654 Chinese who disembarked at Cooktown between 1875 and 1877 were headed for the Palmer. The analysis in Chapter 6, though, suggests that of the 31,204 immigrants from

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18 The hospital in Townsville in 1868 was similarly constructed 'with three-metre wide verandahs ... [and] raised ridge-capping to allow the passage of breeze into the ceiling': Gibson-Wilde, *Townsville to 1884,* p. 99.

Great Britain and Ireland who arrived in Queensland between 1874 and 1878, less than 20 per cent (and more likely only around 10 percent) headed for the gold-fields of Far North Queensland upon their arrival. That assessment does not refute the opening proposition. Rather, it reinforces the view that the Palmer River gold-fields — coming on top of the Queensland Government's extremely active program of encouraging immigration — were seen as epitomising the economic potential of Queensland, as well as the perceived improved standard of living possible within the Australian colonies.[19]

The relatively-small proportion of European immigrants who headed for Far North Queensland upon their arrival also highlights the reality that most of the early settlers in Cooktown, and would-be miners destined for the Palmer or Hodgkinson gold-fields, journeyed there from elsewhere in Queensland or Australia. The other important issue, obscured in simple population statistics, is the extremely high turnover of the population of Cooktown in the 1870s. The analysis in Chapter 5 suggests that between 1875 and 1879, the turnover rate averaged around 50 per cent, going as high as 63 per cent in 1878. The point made in the study is that a community in which half of the population turned over each year could hardly be expected to develop easily any sense of cohesion or civic pride.

In addition to the interpretation regarding the role of Cooktown and the Palmer River gold-fields in attracting immigrants to Queensland has been the associated view that the discovery of gold in Far North Queensland fuelled public optimism and contributed significantly to the economic development of Queensland in the 1880s. Chapter 6, to the limited extent that it addresses that issue, makes the point that while the reports from the Palmer contributed importantly to the highly optimistic view held in London of the colony's potential, the rapid inflow of British investment capital to Queensland in the 1870s and 1880s needs to be seen in a context wider than its acknowledged links to the gold discoveries of North Queensland.

Less developed, however, have been views on the extent to which the discovery of gold was successful in attracting investment capital to

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19 Whether the Australian colonies actually provided an improved standard of living is questionable: see S. Fitzgerald, *Rising damp: Sydney 1870-90,* Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1987, pp. 223-9.

Cooktown, and through Cooktown to the Palmer River and Hodgkinson gold-fields. Chapter 7 concludes that in the critical years of the mid to late 1870s, the Cooktown business community was only marginally successful in attracting investment capital to the Palmer. In part, that was because of the relative scarcity of investment capital in the 1870s. In part also, it was because of somewhat naive commercial expectations and because Cooktown and the Palmer were competing with lower-risk investment opportunities elsewhere in Queensland and the southern colonies. It was also because several early investment ventures went rather badly wrong, through a combination of mismanagement, and investors and the Cooktown business community alike seriously underestimating the practical difficulties of transportation between Cooktown and the gold-fields.

The Issue of Chinese Immigration

Overlaying many of the other interpretations relating to Cooktown and the Palmer have been the traditionally-held views on the Chinese presence in Far North Queensland during the 1870s and 1880s. Probably the most common assumption has been that the 20,000 or so Chinese miners who flooded into the region between 1874 and 1877 not only rapidly denuded the Palmer of its alluvial gold, but took back to China the bulk of the gold they won, with little or no return to the people or government of Queensland. The analysis in Chapter 6 broadly supports that interpretation. Of the estimated 1.25 million ounces of gold mined at the Palmer River between 1874 and 1885, around 60 per cent — or £3 million of the total value of £5.02 million — ended up in Chinese hands. Moreover, only a small fraction of that £3 million probably remained in Queensland, mainly in the form of rates and taxes paid on commercial and residential properties in Cooktown.

What seems less appreciated is the extent of the Chinese presence in Cooktown itself, and the role of Cooktown's Chinese business community in the 1870s. The largely-unrecorded (and certainly under-rated) role of the Chinese in Cooktown is due in large part to the reality that the town's early history was reported and recorded through Western eyes. The fact, therefore, that probably around one third of those living in Cooktown across the peak years 1875-78 were Chinese has almost slipped through the pages of the town's early history.

Yet the analysis in Chapter 4 suggests that a large proportion of Cooktown's trade in the mid to late 1870s was in Chinese hands, with some 35 per cent of the annual turnover generated by the Palmer River gold-fields going to Chinese merchants in Cooktown, with an additional 30 per cent being shared by European and Chinese carriers. Indeed, the major European traders in Cooktown in 1877 probably received only some 3 per cent (or £15,000 in value) of the annual Palmer trade, while the smaller European merchants and storekeepers in Cooktown were by then largely confined to trade within the town and meeting the entertainment and resupply needs of visitors.

The Chinese community in early Cooktown also had a virtual monopoly over the supply of locally-grown fruit and vegetables, as well as poultry and pigs, the local fish market and the provision of fresh water and firewood to the European inhabitants of the town. Their employment and specialisation in those industries, however, was largely because these were tasks and occupations seen by Europeans as beneath their dignity or the worth of their labour. It also related to the perceived adaptability of Chinese labourers to the climate and conditions of North Queensland, against the perceived unsuitability of Europeans for work in the tropics. It was seen by the white community of Cooktown as only reasonable, therefore, that the Chinese should be 'the hewers of wood and carters of water'.

That racist-derived sentiment impacted on two further traditional interpretations regarding the Chinese. The first has been the view that if the Chinese had been excluded from Far North Queensland, a lesser number of Europeans could have gained remunerative employment on the gold-fields for many more years, thereby prolonging the commercial viability of Cooktown. Certainly, it is true that by 1877 the population of the Palmer was comprised almost entirely of Chinese. But, as discussed in Chapter 7, the reality was that none of the European miners had been physically forced from the Palmer. Rather, they had willingly deserted their claims for rushes elsewhere. Moreover, it is questionable — given the contemporary attitudes towards menial labour — whether European miners, unlike the Chinese, would have been prepared to return to their abandoned claims on

the Palmer and rework them several times over, for typically diminishing returns.

The second related view has been that the anti-Chinese sentiment which evolved in Cooktown (and other northern towns) during the 1870s and early 1880s was an important factor in the development of unionism and union attitudes in Australia, as well as in Australia's post-Federation restrictive immigration policy. The analysis in Chapter 7 suggests that while the broader interpretation is undoubtedly correct, the views within Cooktown itself, particularly in the late 1870s, were much more ambivalent.

There were, for example, occasional outbursts in the local newspapers portraying the Chinese as a wretched, inferior class, threatening the social order of white Australia. There were similar concerns periodically expressed that Chinese labourers would undermine the pay and working conditions of Europeans. The underlying appreciation, however, particularly by around 1879, was that the commercial prosperity of Cooktown in the mid 1870s had largely been founded on Chinese immigration and the subsequent resupply of Chinese miners at the Palmer.

The antipathy, therefore, of the business community in Cooktown — as Chinese immigration slowed to a trickle by late 1877 — was directed less at the Chinese, than at the authorities in Brisbane for having introduced (at that stage anyway) restrictive immigration legislation, rather than having heeded the earlier calls from a cross-section of the community simply to exclude the Chinese from new gold-fields for a period of at least three years after their discovery. The attitude of the European community in Cooktown in the late 1870s and early 1880s towards the Chinese residents of the town, and towards the Chinese generally, was far more benevolent than the virulent anti-Chinese sentiments which developed elsewhere in Queensland and in the southern colonies in the 1880s.

The Development of a Queensland or National Ethos

The many hardships endured by the early settlers of Cooktown, and would-be miners en route to the Palmer, have traditionally been seen as epitomising — and contributing to the development of — the pioneering spirit and reputation of early Australians. Contemporary newspaper

accounts frequently lauded the 'heroic exploits' of local individuals, typically in the context of their battle against the harsh terrain, murderous Aborigines or simply the elements.[20] The supposed bravery and determination of European settlers and miners, against the portrayal of Aborigines as cowardly and devious — and the Chinese as insidious, exploitive and immoral — has similarly been a feature of such 'popular' histories as *River of gold*. The conclusion of this study, to the extent it addresses the issue, would be that the pioneering view often aggrandises the exploits of European explorers, prospectors and settlers at the expense of Aborigines. It also frequently under-rates the role and contribution of women.

That is not to deny, of course, that Far North Queensland in the 1870s was any place for the faint-hearted or those of feeble constitution. As discussed in Chapter 5, the hardships of life even in the relative sanctuary of a frontier town such as Cooktown were considerable. The point needs to be made, however, that life *anywhere* in Australia in the mid-nineteenth century was much more violent and more dangerous in terms of diseases, illnesses and accidents than it is today. Aveling in her study of Lillydale, for example, notes that 'the times were violent to a degree we tend to forget today'.[21] Gammage makes the similar point in his study of Narrandera — a place hardly renowned for a violent past — noting that between 1878 and 1882, the number of deaths in the town accounted for 18 per cent of its population at the 1881 census.[22]

The view of early settlers and miners as 'hardy pioneers' also does not sit easily with the now well-accepted fallacy that the tropical areas of northern Australia were unsuited to European habitation. Again, that is not to deny the injurious impact in those days of the likes of dysentery, malaria and dengue fever. Nevertheless, the image of hardy pioneers is somewhat eroded by the prevailing opinion that it was essential for men, women and children to spend at least several weeks each year in the south 'to brace up their systems'. The final point to be made, without belabouring

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20 To an extent, that was probably because 'emphasis on the glorious ... helped the settlers to cope with the rigours of frontier conditions': J.R. Laverty in his review of D. Hamer, *New towns in the new world: Images and perceptions of the nineteenth-century urban frontier,* Columbia University Press, New York, 1990 in *Australian Journal of Politics and History,* 40, 2, 1994, p. 279.

21 Aveling, *Lillydale,* p. 44.

22 Gammage, *Narrandera Shire,* p. 132.

the issue too far, is that most such brave pioneers were in Cooktown or Far North Queensland for the primary purpose of making their fortune, or at least making money more quickly than they could have elsewhere. What is being suggested is simply that if the label of 'pioneer' is used in the context of early Cooktown, it needs to be applied judiciously, both in terms of the deeds done and the motives for them.

A second traditional interpretation has been that most of the early European business-people in Cooktown, as well as white miners, operated as individuals or perhaps in partnership with one other, with the popular notion being that the practice derived from the evolving ethos of being one's own boss, as opposed to an employed 'wages man'. As indicated in the introductory chapter, that explanation seems somewhat too idealistic.

In part, the practice probably had some derivatory connection to the regulations relating to the granting of alluvial mining leases on the Queensland gold-fields. As discussed in Chapter 2, each miner could claim an area forty feet by forty feet and retain 'ownership' as long as he or she continued to work the claim. Obviously, there were some advantages in a group of miners working as partners or as small companies — as occurred on both the Gympie and Charters Towers fields — in terms of the efficiencies of group labour and being better able to deter claim-jumpers. A good deal of the early investment in reef mining elsewhere also came from groups of miners working in partnerships or small companies, with early share-dealings in Gympie and Charters Towers, for example, often expressed as quarter, eighth, twelfth etc share of a mine.

The disadvantages were that if the group concentrated its efforts at a single site, its other claims could legally be 'jumped' by outsiders if left unworked for more than twenty-four hours. Partnerships were also liable to disputes, not least over the division of labour and its profits. Prospectors similarly usually operated alone, or with a single 'mate', again on the basis that if they struck it rich, the proceeds would be theirs alone. On the Palmer, the high costs of reef-mining, together with the relative paucity of payable reefs, further militated against collective enterprise.

In Cooktown itself, a large proportion of European businesses were also single-proprietor enterprises, or small concerns employing

perhaps one or two assistants, or run as family businesses. In early 1874, for example, only twelve of the 118 (almost exclusively European) businesses in the town were described as 'large stores', probably employing several persons and typically run by a manager on behalf of a Brisbane or southern-based parent company.[23] The reasons for the seemingly-disproportionate number of small businesses are unclear. One possible explanation is that their proliferation reflected the 'get rich quick' mentality so pervasive in early Cooktown, which often stemmed from individuals — with minimal capital and expertise — whose intention was simply to make as much money as possible in the shortest time, before returning south. Such individuals had little interest in partnerships or joint ventures, simply because that would have committed them and their limited resources to stay in the town.

The consequence, both in relation to mining and small businesses in Cooktown, was that individuals were usually unable to attract the capital — or the economies of scale — necessary to operate successfully either as a more permanent reef-miner on the Palmer or as a medium-size business-person in Cooktown. By 1877, therefore, four years after first settlement, Cooktown was still largely a collection of small shops. So in Cooktown's case, at least, the ethos of 'individualism' — if it can be said to have ever existed as such — facilitated the eventual demise of the town.

The Structural Viability of Coastal Towns

The discussion on small businesses in early Cooktown leads usefully to the traditional interpretation that those who profited most from the discovery of gold at the Palmer River were not the prospectors or miners, but those engaged in the service industries — the storekeepers, the publicans and the carriers operating both at Cooktown and on the gold-fields. The comment made in the introductory chapter was that while the assumption is no doubt correct, no serious attempt seems ever to have been made to quantify the turnover involved or, indeed, to establish how critical the service industries were to the structural viability of Cooktown.

The analysis in Chapter 6 confirms that those who profited most were in the service industries. Figure 6.3 at page 272 of Chapter 6, for

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23 See Table 4.12 at page 176 in Chapter 4.

example, suggests that European and Chinese miners ended up with less than 18 per cent of the value of gold mined at the Palmer between 1874 and 1885, compared to almost 70 per cent to the service industries. Moreover, the break-up within that 70 per cent was 17 per cent to carriers, 26 per cent to Cooktown or Palmer-based merchants, 16 per cent to China-based suppliers or financiers, and 11 per cent to merchants or suppliers elsewhere in Australia. In terms of racial division, Europeans in Cooktown won only a quarter of the 70 per cent which went to the service industries.

The more detailed analysis in Chapter 4 similarly confirms contemporary accounts that there was generally more to be made from the carrying trade than there was from prospecting, particularly in the years 1875-76. In 1876, for example, the 130 or so bullock-dray teams plying the route between Cooktown and the Palmer probably each earned a gross yearly average of £530 (against the set up cost of probably around £400); the eighty or so horse-wagon teams probably each earned a gross yearly average of £265 (against a set-up cost of around £175), while the 570 or so pack-horses would each have earned £25 (against a purchase cost of around £12).[24] In many cases, stock losses through disease, injuries and attacks by Aborigines could well have reduced gross profits by at least 50 per cent.

As Figure 6.3 suggests, however, the merchants and other small business-persons in Cooktown and at the Palmer benefited from the Palmer trade even more than the carriers (26 per cent of the total across the years 1874 to 1885, against 17 per cent for carriers). Chapter 4 suggests that across the peak years 1876-78, the twelve major Chinese traders in Cooktown each had an annual turnover of at least £12,000, whereas the four or five major European traders were by 1878 competing for a total of only around £8,000. Indeed, by 1877, the European merchants and storekeepers in Cooktown were largely confined to trade within the town, and meeting the entertainment and resupply needs of visitors, who numbered by then around 100 per day.

That leads to the final traditional interpretation, namely that Cooktown's viability was inextricably linked to the viability of the Palmer River gold-fields and that once the Palmer slid into decline, Cooktown followed suit. As evidenced by the conclusions in the preceding paragraph,

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24 See the discussion at page 172 of Chapter 4, and footnote 70.

though, it can be seen that the European merchants and storekeepers were in trouble — because of the commercial dominance of the Chinese — as early as 1876-77. That was because the European business community had been established in the formative years of 1874 and 1875 on the basis of meeting the service needs of a large number of temporarily-accommodated residents, a daily transient population of around 100 white males *and* being involved in meeting the resupply requirements of a predominantly-white group of miners at the Palmer. By 1877, as the transient population became increasingly dominated by the Chinese and as the white business community's share of the Palmer trade fell from 14.5 per cent in 1875 to 3.2 per cent in 1877, many white businesses went to the wall.

Beyond that time-frame, the commercial demise of Cooktown certainly parallelled that of the Palmer. The analysis in Chapter 4 suggests that by 1880 the annual turnover in trade generated by the Palmer had fallen to less than £130,000 from a high of almost £320,000 in 1877. By 1884, the total was down to less than £35,000. In the absence of other industries or services being established in Cooktown or its hinterland, the remaining European and Chinese businesses in the town slid steadily further into decline.

The associated issue is why Cooktown failed to diversify as a market outlet or service centre for other industries or settlements. The analysis in Chapter 7 points out that Cooktown had no sawmill, no engineering or processing industries, no mining industries other than gold, no agricultural or pastoral industries, and failed even to develop the town as a home port for the *bêche-de-mer* or pearl-shelling industries. Yet similar towns elsewhere seemed to manage the transition much more successfully. By 1882, for example, Townsville had diversified into the sugar-cane and pastoral industries, had a boiling-down works, soap-making factory, brewery and two sawmills, and was home port to a *bêche-de-mer* fleet.[25] Cairns had established its own sawmill by 1877.[26] And within a decade of its establishment, Narrandera had two coach-building factories, a brewery and a viable sawmill.[27]

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25 See Gibson-Wilde, *Townsville to 1884,* pp. 113-5, 129-30, and 166.
26 See Jones, *Trinity Phoenix,* p. 129.
27 See Gammage, *Narrandera Shire,* p. 139.

The explanation advanced in Chapter 7 is that Cooktown was seemingly never able to attract civic and business leaders with a broader vision than that possessed by the small-scale European traders and artisans who typified its business community in the mid to late 1870s. Similarly, because the business community of the town comprised mainly small-scale traders and artisans, no-one — apart from several of the key Chinese merchants, who presumably had little interest anyway in 'boosting' the town to non-Chinese — had the necessary capital or business acumen to develop the resources of the town or the region.

That is not to understate, of course, the difficulties which Cooktown would have faced in diversifying into other long-term industries or services. The viability of processing industries, such as engineering and sawmilling, would have been dependent on local demand which, in turn, would have required the continuing success of mining at the Palmer. And, as will be discussed later in this chapter, it is problematic whether the region actually had the potential to sustain diversification beyond alluvial mining.

Some Additional Interpretations

Obviously, it is a moot point as to how accurately the interpretations just discussed actually reflect the themes of regional, Queensland and national history which traditionally have been applied to Cooktown. Certainly, there is no definitive list. And another researcher may well have a quite different perspective. However, as discussed in the introductory chapter, the aim has been to group some of the more obvious interpretations under a number of broad headings, primarily to facilitate the comparative evaluation of early Cooktown and similar small towns elsewhere in Queensland and Australia.[28]

As foreshadowed in the introductory chapter, there have also been several additional interpretations emerge during the course of this study which might have wider significance elsewhere. The three selected for brief discussion are the incompetence of early civic leaders, the divisiveness within Cooktown's early community, and seeing history through the eyes and words of a contemporary middle class.

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28 See, for example, the discussion of the need for comparative evaluation in Johnston, *A new province,* p. viii.

The Incompetence of Early Civic Leaders

As discussed in Chapter 6, the municipal affairs of Cooktown in the mid to late 1870s were plagued by mismanagement, ineptitude, occasional suspicions of embezzlement and some questionable public works priorities. The reasons for it are less clear, other than simply sheeting the blame upon the elected civic officials. One explanation, as raised in Chapter 6, is that many of those best qualified to deal with the affairs of the town were too busy with their own business interests to volunteer their services for the good of the community. A similar situation apparently prevailed in early Albany, with Garden noting

> [p]erhaps the community lacked natural leaders because the [key traders] ... were too busy with their own affairs.[29]

But in towns elsewhere, that was not necessarily the case. In Townsville, for example, the key merchants reportedly 'combined with a remarkable unity to further the development of the town'.[30] And in Gladstone, many of those elected to public office in the 1870s were 'key [business]men in their own right'.[31] It does seem that in Cooktown, however, there was almost an extreme preoccupation within the business community in profit-making, resulting in the affairs of the town being largely left in the hands of a 'second eleven'.

A further explanation, as discussed in Chapter 5, might be sought in the occupational background of those elected to public office in Cooktown. Table 5.19 at page 258 suggested that between 1874 and 1885, 55 per cent of all office-holders were merchants or small business-persons, 16 per cent were professionals, 13 per cent were white-collar managers, 12 per cent were artisans and 4 per cent were white-collar staff. Yet that cross-section seems reasonably typical of civic office-holders in other Australian towns at the time. In Bunbury, for example, five of the first fifteen councillors were artisans, while another three were storekeepers.[32] In Townsville, seven of the ten mayors between 1864 and 1884 were merchants.[33] In Narrandera,

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29 Garden, *Albany,* p. 99.
30 Gibson-Wilde, *Townsville to 1884,* p. 135.
31 McDonald, *Gladstone,* p. 199.
32 Barker and Laurie, *A history of Bunbury,* p. 114.
33 Gibson-Wilde, *Townsville to 1884,* p. 135.

forty-one of the forty-five aldermen elected to office between 1885 and 1901 were businessmen.[34] And in Gladstone, the majority of aldermen were storekeepers, tradesmen of various kinds and publicans.[35] Moreover, it seems reasonable to expect — as pointed out in Chapter 5 — that successful businessmen would have been as solid, trustworthy and pragmatic in municipal affairs as they presumably were in their own business affairs.

Another explanation, which seems more likely, is that the extremely high rate of population turnover in Cooktown — which was similarly reflected in the turnover of civic office-holders — contributed significantly to the collective incompetence of the town's civic leadership. As discussed already, the general population turnover in Cooktown across the years 1875 to 1879 was often in excess of 50 per cent annually. And it was not unusual for those remaining — including municipal office bearers — to leave the town for weeks on end, either in pursuit of business opportunities elsewhere or to recuperate their health in the south. So it was perhaps hardly surprising that the municipal council often had difficulties even in raising a quorum, let alone achieving continuity in forward-planning and decision-making.

The conclusion would seem to be, therefore, that the collective ineptitude of early civic leaders was partly the result of the selection process, and partly the result of the town's extremely high population turnover. The extent to which a similar combination of factors may have existed in other Australian towns, resulting in civic incompetence on a similar scale, cannot easily be deduced. But the fact that most municipal office-holders were unpaid — as were parliamentary representatives at the time — certainly suggests that those involved in the civic advancement of the town were not necessarily the best available for the job.[36]

The Divisiveness within Cooktown's Early Community

An associated issue, and one which certainly would have impacted on the performance of the town's office-holders, was the reality that Cooktown across the years 1875 to 1878, in particular, was wracked by

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34 Gammage, *Narrandera Shire,* p. 133.

35 McDonald, *Gladstone,* p. 199.

36 That is not to deny, of course, that a similar situation does not apply even today, in terms of the capabilities of those in the public and private sectors.

several intense personality clashes, as well as the chasmic division between its European and Chinese communities. As discussed in Chapter 5, the personality clashes centred on the administration of the hospital, and between the town clerk and William Simpson, an aspiring and eventual alderman. There was also a damaging rift between the municipal council and the Cooktown Progress Association. On the Chinese issue, the division existed not only in a physical and racial sense between the two communities, but also between those in the European business community who favoured Chinese immigration, against those who were vehemently opposed, typically on the grounds of race and a concern for European rates of pay and standards of living.

Yet it is evident that other small Australian towns suffered similar ructions and divisions. In Bunbury, for example, the town was split in the 1850s between two groups vying for the ear and support of Perth.[37] The history of Albany is similarly dotted with disputes and factional alignments, seen as typifying the fate of small and isolated communities.[38] Gladstone's local government was effectively defunct from 1869 until early 1872 because of a personal vendetta involving several aldermen.[39] And in 1883, Narrandera's 300 or so Chinese lived in a separate encampment to the white township, with a major source of irritation to the Europeans being the dozen white women married to Chinese.[40]

Moreover, it does seem from almost any reading of the history of small towns in Australia that vendettas, family feuds and wider divisions are not uncommon in many such communities, often stretching back and over several decades or generations. Similarly, the assimilation or even acceptance of minority ethnic groups into the general community is often more difficult and more pronounced in smaller towns than in larger cities. What does not seem to have been developed, in a comparative sense, is the effect that such divisiveness has had on the development of community in small Australian towns and, indeed, its effect on civic advancement in an already struggling town such as Cooktown in the late 1870s.

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37 See Barker and Laurie, *A history of Bunbury,* p. 126.
38 See the discussion in Garden, *Albany,* pp. 102-3.
39 See McDonald, *Gladstone,* p. 199.
40 See Gammage, *Narrandera Shire,* pp. 141 and 145.

History through Middle Class Eyes

A third important theme to emerge from this study is the extent to which the surviving records of early Cooktown provide a very narrow and middle class perspective of the town's formation and the development of its community. The local newspaper accounts, for example, provide reasonable coverage of the important or interesting day-to-day events and activities. But they are very much reported from the perspective of an educated, middle class, European male, whose views conform closely to that of 'the establishment'. Minority groups in the town — most notably the Chinese, and fringe Aborigines — rate barely a mention. Similarly, the reader gets very little insight of the lifestyle, working conditions, family situation or broadly-held views of the labouring class within the town. And women and children — unless they were the families of the town's well-off residents — may well have not existed.

Surviving official correspondence between Cooktown and the authorities in Brisbane — as well as government publications and records — also relate largely to the activities and interests of the town's more prominent citizens or business-persons. Much of the early correspondence, for example, relates to such matters as disputes over building allotments, the need for a hospital, school, cemetery or race-track — and the lobby groups involved — or requests for additional government services or personnel. Again, there is very little that can be gleaned to better appreciate the lifestyle of those who comprised the bulk of the population.

The counter, of course, is that it was the middle-class residents of the town who were the decision-makers and those most responsible for the town's transformation from a fledgling settlement to municipality in the space of three years. So an analysis of their views and decisions is arguably more important than a better understanding of the masses. The point being made, however, is that history seen only through middle class eyes, and within the prevailing paradigm of middle class social values and outlook, fails to provide a comprehensive appreciation of community life in colonial Australia.

To that end, it undoubtedly is a truism to say that the better histories of Australian towns are likely to be those which have drawn on a

wide variety of source materials, reflecting a broad cross-section of the community under analysis. Moreover, first or even second-hand oral accounts are probably likely to provide a broader perspective than many written accounts. It seems important, therefore, that historians should become more pro-active in encouraging the collection and preservation of a wide range of primary source material, not least for future generations, and to ensure that situations like Cooktown's — where most of the early material has been lost or destroyed — become the exception rather than the rule.

The Hypothesis of the Study

The central argument of this study, as outlined in the introductory chapter, has been that Cooktown's demise in the late 1870s and early 1880s was exacerbated — if not caused — by a self-serving group of 'boosters' who, under the guise of civic and business community leadership, not only talked up the prospects of the town and its hinterland but did so at the expense of the diversification of Cooktown's economy. The contention is that many of the 'boosters', having achieved a degree of social respectability in Cooktown considerably beyond their prospects elsewhere, attempted to perpetuate their status by replicating in later years the small-business 'boom' of the early 1870s. Moreover, because their vision was so tunnelled by self-interest, they failed to develop — or even tried to develop — other industries or services which may have ensured the longer-term viability of the town.

Attempting to prove that hypothesis has not been as easy as first imagined, not least because of the paucity of primary source material, especially in relation to the various individuals involved. It is also the case that the demise of an early Australian frontier township such as Cooktown obviously involved a more complex interplay of reasons than can be found in a single explanation. It is also easy to be wise — or critical — with the benefit of hindsight. And superimposing the collective wisdom of a subsequent 120 years onto a situation which existed in the 1870s probably denigrates unfairly the bulk of the people who were trying to do their best within the limits of their experience, and in a male-dominated, Victorian-era society on one of the remotest edges of white civilisation in Australia.

The question could also well be asked, given the environmental conditions and natural resources of the region, whether diversification was indeed a viable possibility. Recent studies, under the auspices of the Queensland Government's 1994/95 *Cape York Peninsula Land Use Strategy (CYPLUS)* project, have contended that the region contains significant mineral deposits[41], as well as commercially-viable timber resources.[42] Associated studies, though, have concluded that 'the overall low soil fertility [of the region] probably limits the range of plant communities'.[43] Moreover, at a symposium on Cape York Peninsula, conducted by the Royal Society of Queensland in 1979, the lead speaker asserted that

> the present undeveloped nature of Cape York Peninsula can be traced mostly to two factors which have placed some enormous difficulties in the way of those seeking to exploit it — a protracted and severe annual drought, and the poverty of almost all its soils.[44]

The point being made, however, is that regardless of the potential difficulties, very few efforts were made even to try to diversify the town's economy. Moreover, it does seem that Cooktown in the early to mid 1870s was more sharply business-oriented than most comparably-sized towns elsewhere in Queensland and Australia. In a number of other towns, anecdotal accounts suggest that a fair proportion of early residents — although attracted primarily by business opportunities — had typically moved with their families and with the intention of settling probably for several years at least.[45] So the business focus of such towns typically became subsumed within the wider development and interests of the broad community.

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41 T.J. Denaro, *Cape York Peninsula land use strategy: project NRO4 mineral resource inventory,* Queensland Department of Minerals and Energy, Brisbane, 1994, p. 4.

42 B. Wannan, *Survey of forest resources of Cape York Peninsula,* Office of the Co-ordinator General of Queensland, Brisbane, 1995, p. 47.

43 R.F. Isbell, *Soil landscapes of Cape York Peninsula,* Office of the Co-ordinator General of Queensland, Brisbane, 1995, p. 9.

44 B. Rigsby, 'Introduction to the symposium', quoting P. Stanton, in N.C. Stevens and A. Bailey (eds.), *Contemporary Cape York Peninsula,* Royal Society of Queensland, St. Lucia, 1980, p. 3. Note also that a more recent publication, Far North Queensland Regional Planning Advisory Committee, *FNQ 2010: a balanced future — a regional growth management framework for Far North Queensland,* Queensland Department of Housing, Local Government and Planning, Brisbane, 1995, does not even include Cooktown as part of Far North Queensland.

45 In Townsville, as already cited, a number of married miners moved there with their families in the mid to late 1860s: see Gibson-Wilde, *Townsville to 1884,* p. 136.

Yet in Cooktown — as discussed in Chapter 5 — most of the early residents were single or unaccompanied European men, whose aim was to make 'a quick buck' before returning south.[46] Moreover, many of those early businessmen, because they had no intention of staying long in the town, made little attempt to expand their businesses or turn their profits into more substantial premises or commercial endeavours. Early Cooktown was, therefore, largely a collection of small shops and one-person or family-run businesses, with practically no industries and very little invested capital. And, as discussed in Chapter 6, civic indifference would have to rate as one of the key features of the history of early Cooktown.

During the first year or so of settlement, though, there does seem to have emerged an appreciation within the Cooktown community that the town's focus on its trading links with the Palmer was proving to be at the expense of public works and services in Cooktown. There also seems to have emerged a certain resentment towards the authorities in Brisbane, based on the perception that the Government's only real interest in the town related to the collection of revenue. The year 1875, therefore, saw a perceptible change of attitude within the business community of Cooktown, towards the view that the interests of the town — or at least its businesses — would be best served by the development or upgrading of its civic infrastructure and services. The underlying sentiment was that by creating a favourable impression of Cooktown, more residents might be encouraged northwards, as well as other 'hopefuls' who might transit the town bound for its hinterland.

It also seems likely, as discussed in Chapter 5, that the early civic and business leaders in Cooktown — or those most outspoken on the issue of civic advancement — were not necessarily either the most successful businessmen, or the best qualified to advance the interests of the town. Those individuals — most notably Edmund Henriques, the Brodziak brothers, Charles Bouel and Maurice Fox — were usually too engrossed in the successful pursuit of their own business affairs to have the interest or time to devote to the affairs of the town.[47] Indeed, those who did volunteer

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46 Table 5.12 at page 226 suggested that the male to female ratio was often greater than 80:20.

47 The corollary is that those successful businessmen or government officials who did volunteer to serve often were not particularly effective, because of competing pressures or enforced absences on private or official business elsewhere.

their services to municipal affairs seem often to have been 'the second eleven', who saw civic development as one means of reviving the slowly flagging fortunes of their own businesses.

Once they were appointed or elected to civic office, however, they then found that the position brought with it a degree of social respectability and responsibility beyond that which they probably could every have achieved or aspired to in a larger town or city elsewhere in Queensland. Yet that status was dependent upon the continued viability of Cooktown (though not necessarily their own business). So the 'boosters', as discussed in Chapter 7, continued to talk up the prospects of the town and the Palmer River and Hodgkinson gold-fields, and to agitate for the accoutrements of 'civilised society' in the form of paved roads, bridges, botanical gardens etc, in an attempt to encourage a continuing flow of new arrivals to and through the town.[48]

The unfortunate aspect is that because many of the boosters were 'second eleven' grade, they lacked the foresight, business acumen or broader vision to realise that the commercial viability of Cooktown would necessitate the diversification of its economy beyond its singular reliance on the prosperity of the Palmer River gold-fields. Throughout the late 1870s and early 1880s, therefore, no serious moves were made to identify or develop an alternative and long-term industry or service for the region. Instead, the boosters pinned their hopes on the opening of a railway line between Cooktown and its hinterland. When that venture failed — as any feasibility study would have predicted — the boosters had played their last card.

What is less clear is why successive governments in Brisbane seem to have been willing to believe — or at least not to dismiss — the continuing hyperbole coming from Cooktown's civic and business leaders throughout the late 1870s and early 1880s. It is similarly unclear — other than the fact that the loan market was much more buoyant in the 1880s than earlier — why the authorities in Brisbane eventually agreed to the expenditure of

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48 See also the view that the idealism of boosters 'amounted collectively to a powerful vision of a new urban world in the process of being created free of the evils of the old': D. Hamer, *New towns in the new world: images and perceptions of the nineteenth-century urban frontier,* Columbia University Press, New York, 1990, p. 62.

over £100,000 on the ill-fated Cooktown to Laura railway line, having resisted the pleas and demands of Cooktown's boosters over the previous five or more years.

The most obvious explanation, as discussed in Chapter 7, is that approval for the railway was primarily the result of bureaucratic inertia, within the context of Queensland's overall development strategy at that time, with its focus on railway construction, immigration and land settlement. There is also the tinge of a suspicion, as also mentioned in Chapter 7, that the authorities eventually agreed to the expenditure simply to rid themselves of the constant harping from Cooktown that it had been poorly treated over the years by Brisbane.

Whatever the reason, the fact remains that the money was largely wasted, with the line to Laura effectively defunct even before it was completed. That raises the issue of whether the Queensland Government should have played a more direct and more interventionist role in both regional development and in facilitating the structural viability of frontier towns such as Cooktown. With the admitted benefit of hindsight, it is evident that if the authorities in Brisbane had taken a closer interest in the proposed Cooktown-Laura railway, they might have saved much wasted expenditure.

The corollary is that had the £100,000 been put towards the establishment of an industry or service which offered some prospect of surviving in the longer-term, the early history of Cooktown might have been remembered for something more glorious than going from 'boom to bust' in the space of little more than a decade.

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